

how we document

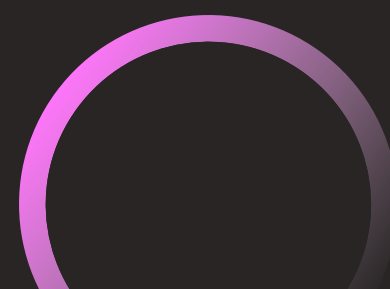
2023

brought to you by
 zeroheight

welcome to 2023



Design system documentation continues to gain momentum every year. **How We Document** is an opportunity for us to reflect on the changes and challenges we face as a community. This year, **over 500** of you participated to establish where we're at, where we're going, and where we need to be.



contents

- **who** took this survey
- your **organization**
- your design system **team**
- your design system and **documentation**
- your design system and **happiness**



who took
this survey



primary discipline



9% engineering

7% design ops

6% product management

3% content

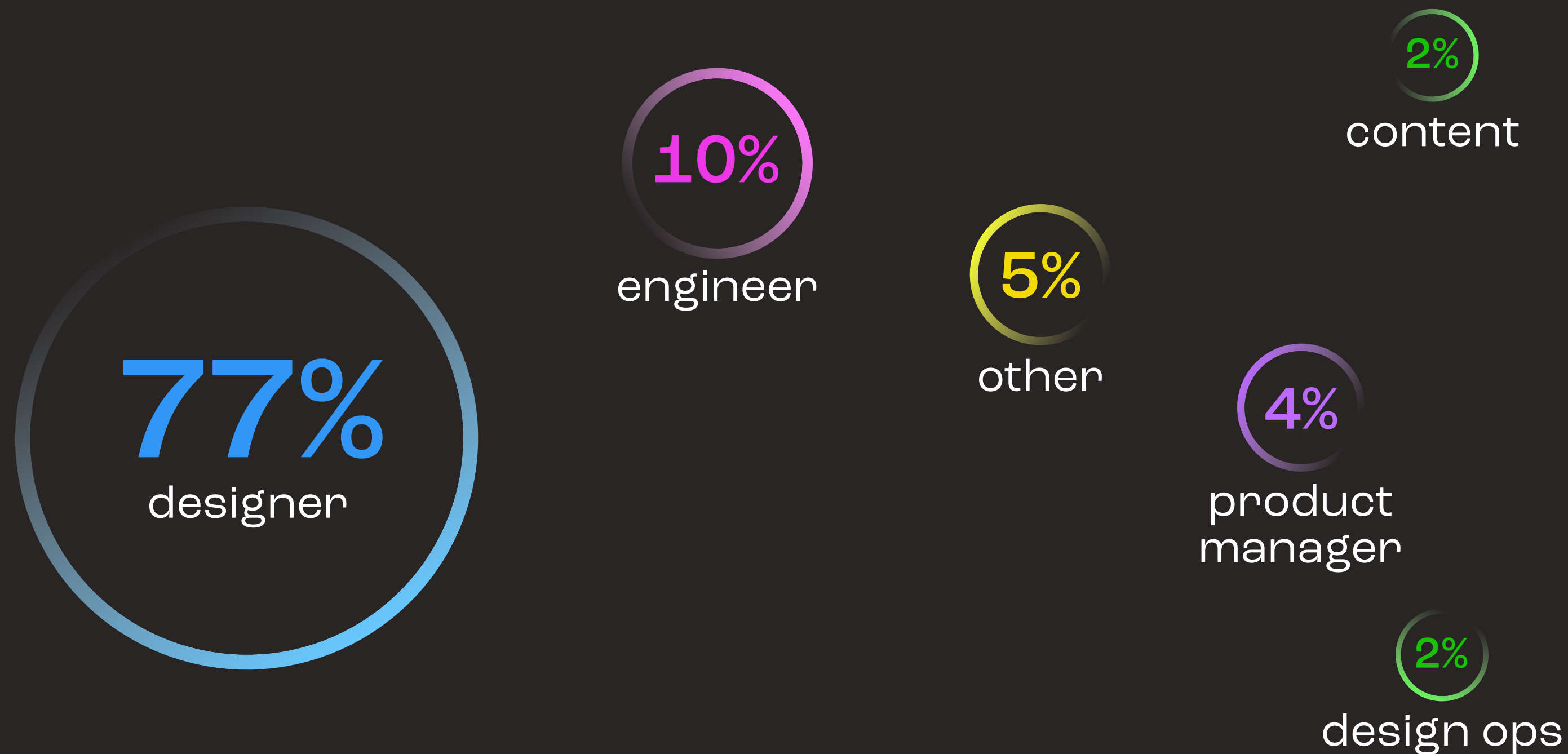
72%

of disciplines were
Design & UX

Design roles represented most of the respondents (72%). Engineering, DesignOps, and Product Management were relatively even.

job titles

There were 238 unique job titles from our respondents. Interestingly enough, **16%** of the job titles explicitly state “design system.” This could be a strong indicator that the industry is recognizing the importance of design systems.



69%
of people have
documentation as a
core part of their role

design system job titles

We compiled a list of the unique job titles for design system people. If you're looking for a new role or to expand your team, these are the titles organizations are using.

Operations

Design Ops & Design System Manager
Design System Manager / Ops
Senior Design System Ops
Senior Program Manager, Design System

Design

Design System Designer
Design System Lead
Design System Product Lead
Lead Designer, Design System
Lead Product Designer & Design System Manager
Lead Product Designer, Platform & Design System
Product Designer, Design System
Senior Design System Designer
Senior UX Designer, Design System
Senior Product Designer, Design System
Visual Design Lead - Design System

Management

Design System & UI Manager
Design System Community & Support Manager
Design System Manager
Design System Product Strategy Manager
Director Design Systems & Ops
Head of Design System
Senior Design System Manager

Product management

Design System Product Manager
Product Manager, Design System

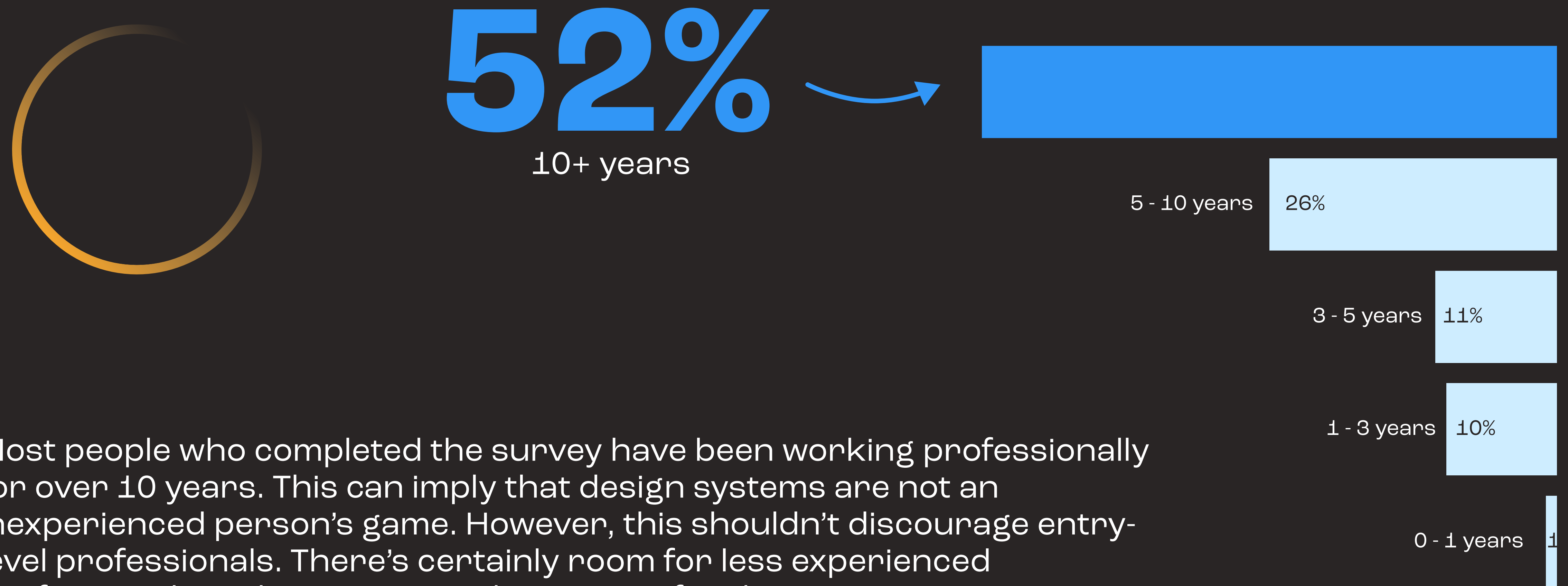
Engineering

Design System Developer
Design System Engineer
Design System Tech Lead
Principal Design System Engineer
Senior Design System Engineer

Other roles

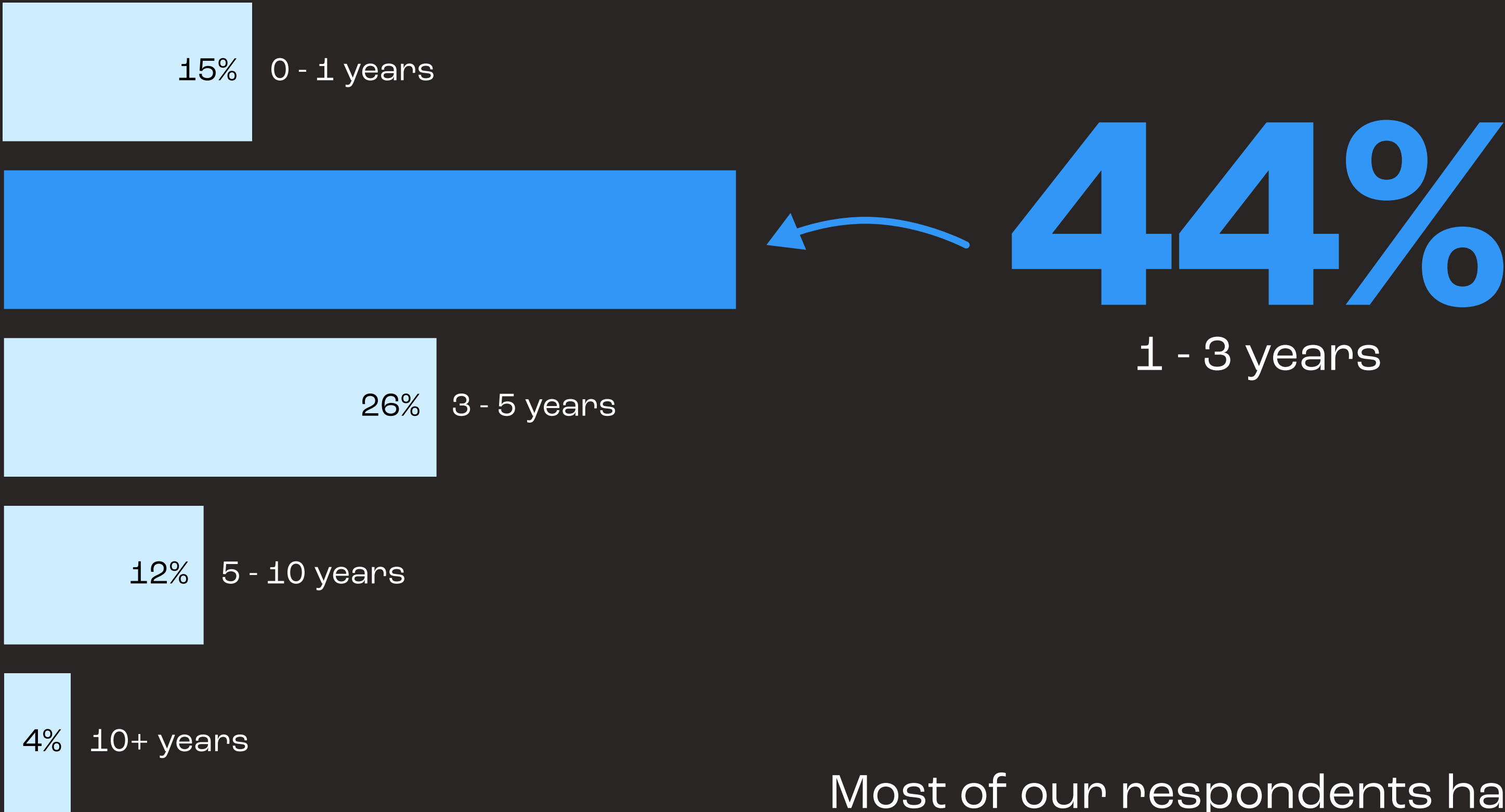
Design System Specialist
Senior Design System Analyst
Senior UX Writer - Design System

professional experience



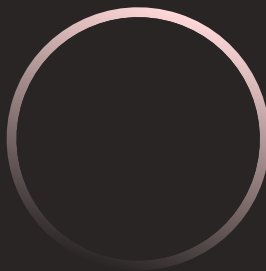
Most people who completed the survey have been working professionally for over 10 years. This can imply that design systems are not an inexperienced person's game. However, this shouldn't discourage entry-level professionals. There's certainly room for less experienced professionals and teams are making space for them.

design system experience



Most of our respondents have been working on design systems between 1-3 years (44%). As a large amount of people have under 3 years experience, this is an indicator that more people are beginning to include design systems in their work.

more seasoned professionals work on design systems



42%

25 - 34 years old



35 - 44 years old 36%

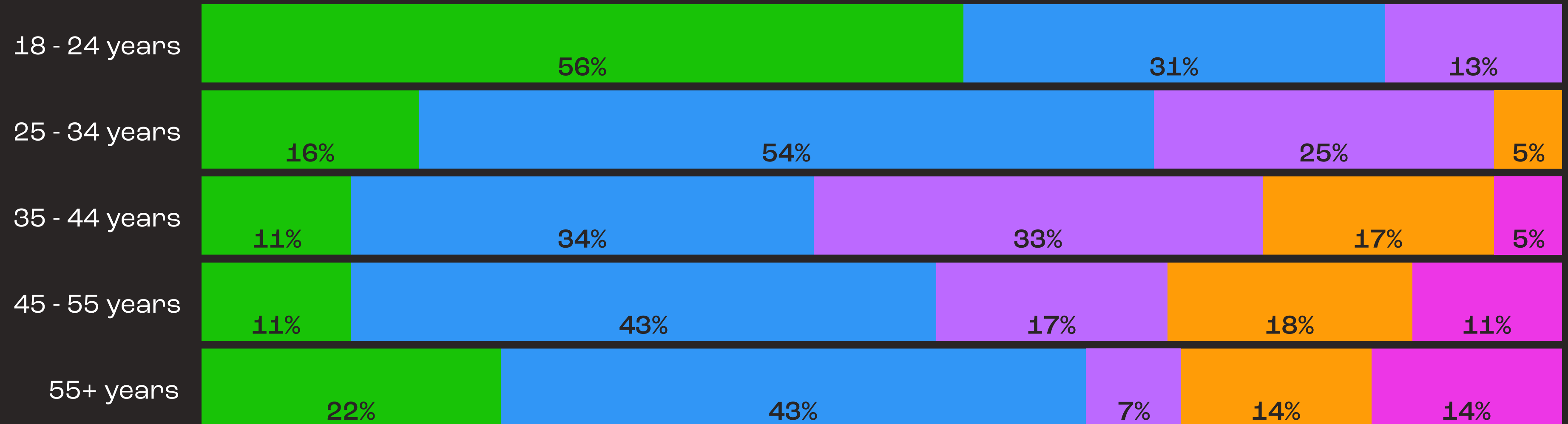
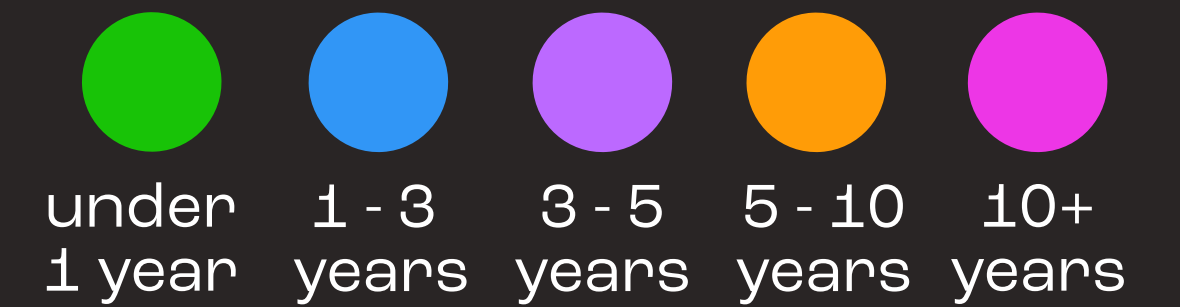
18 - 24 years old 3%

45 - 54 years old 15%

55+ years old 3%

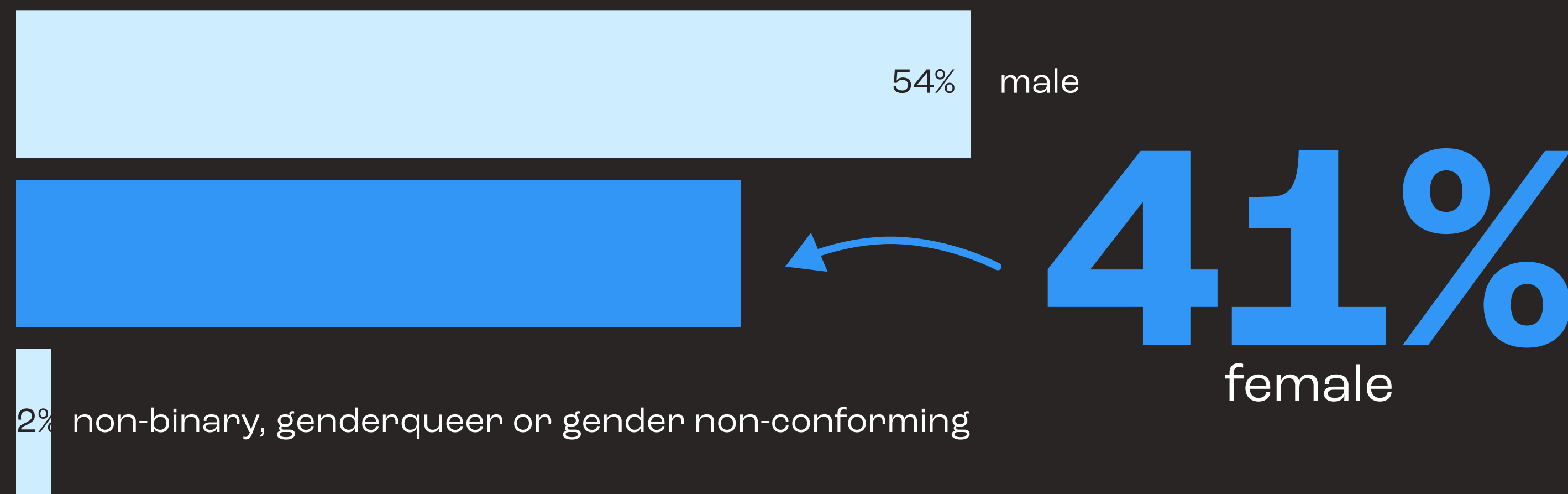
We added this new question this year. While most of the respondents are 25-34 years old, it was only slightly higher than the number of 35-44 year olds. We can see why this might be; design systems are usually complex in nature and require cross-functional coordination. More seasoned teammates typically handle projects like these.

age doesn't equate to design system experience



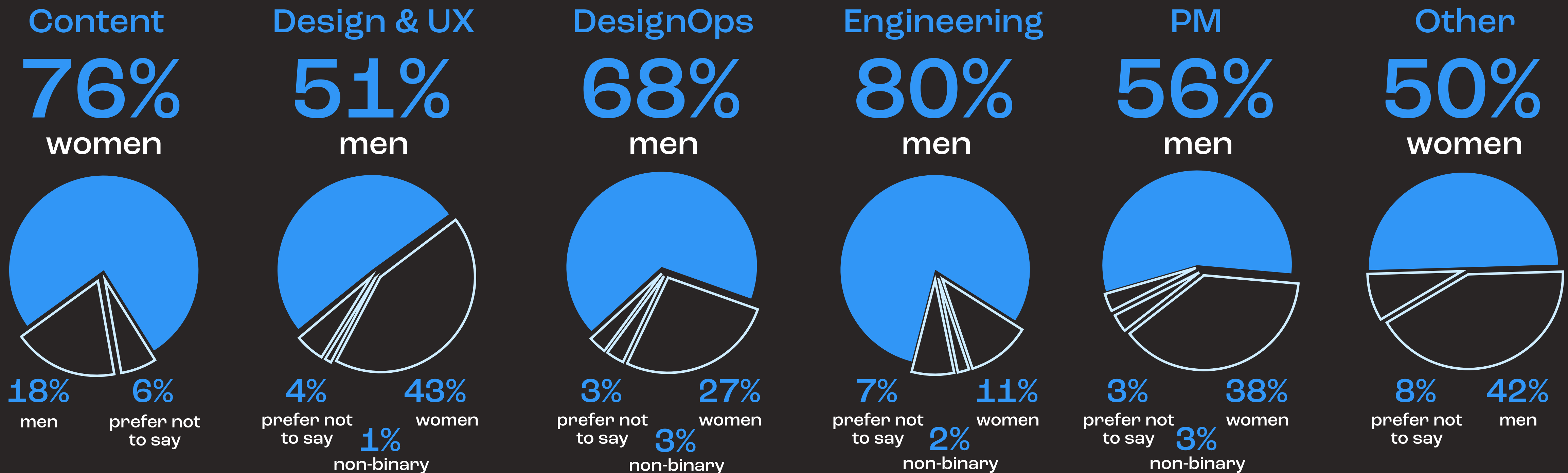
Regardless of age, most people only had 1-3 years of design system experience. Most people with 3-5 years of experience were 35 to 44-year-olds. One could guess the timing was right in their career. They likely had enough professional experience to explore design systems when it was new. What's encouraging is that regardless of age, most people are relatively new to design systems, so the playing field is pretty even.

women are well represented



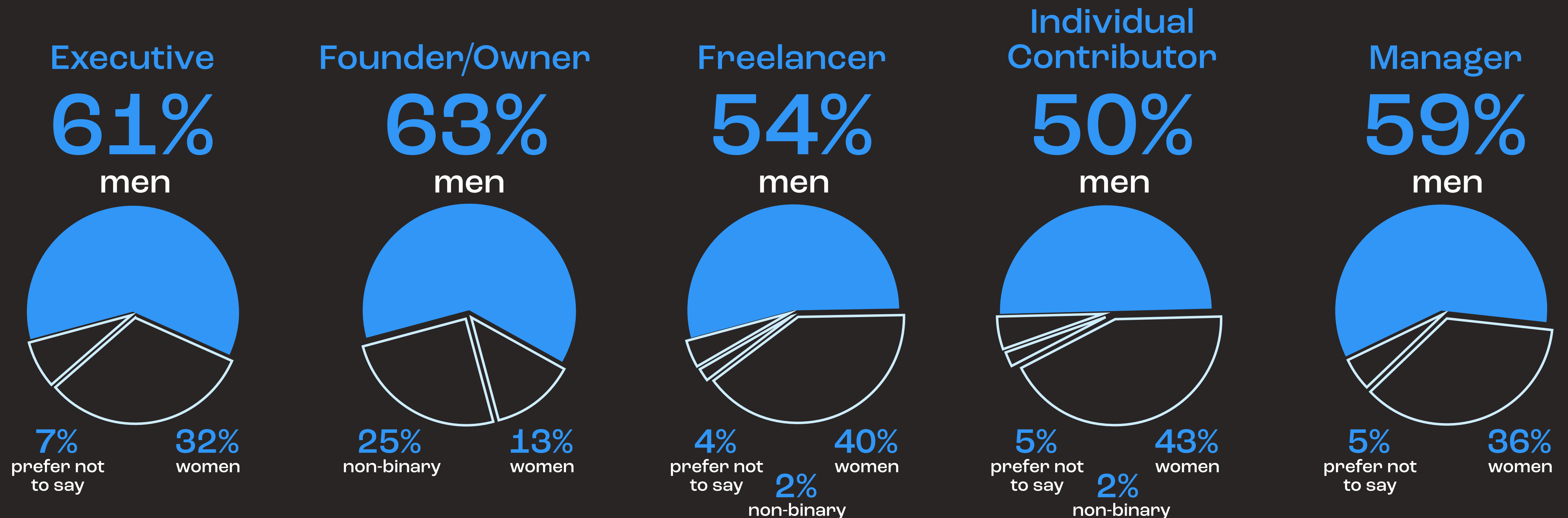
We asked about gender this year, to get a sense of the landscape. For our respondents, **54%** identified as male and **41%** identified as female. It's great to see there was a good representation of women considering women only make up **26%** of the workforce in tech.*

most roles are dominated by men



Organizing roles by gender reveals that most roles are male dominated. The only role that was mostly women were content roles (76%). Design and UX roles were a little more balanced with 51% identifying as men and 43% identifying as women. Interestingly enough, of people that selected “other” as their discipline were 50% women and only 42% men. Based on written responses, most of these roles were hybrid in nature.

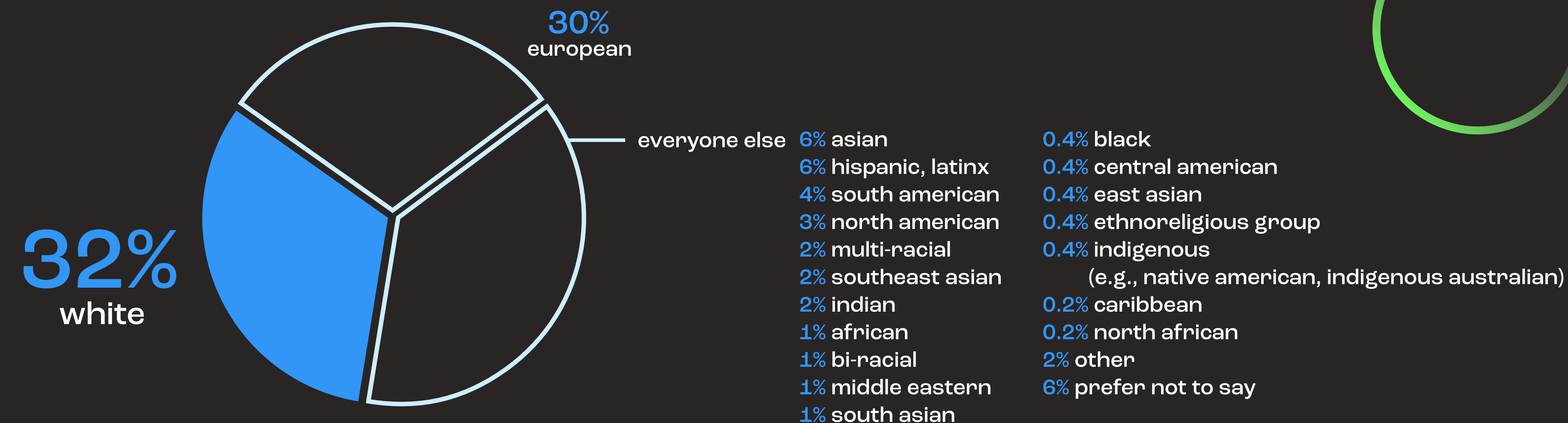
men only slightly outnumber women in some levels



A majority of our participants were managers, individual contributors, and freelancers/consultants. Men only led women by a little. We had fewer respondents at the exec and founder/owner roles, which had more respondents identify as men. But there were more non-binary respondents than women for the founder/owner level.

Respondents: 518

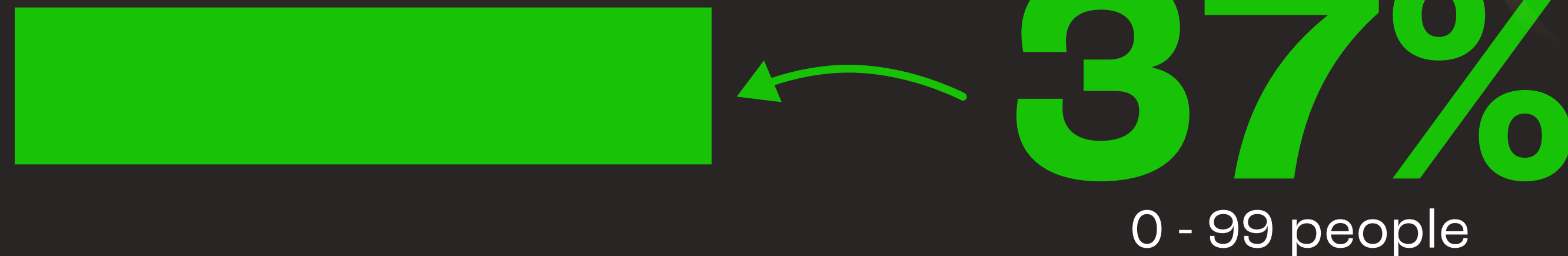
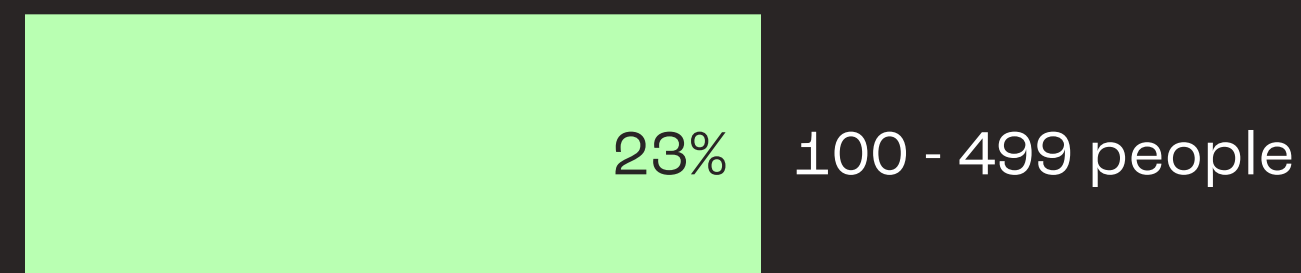
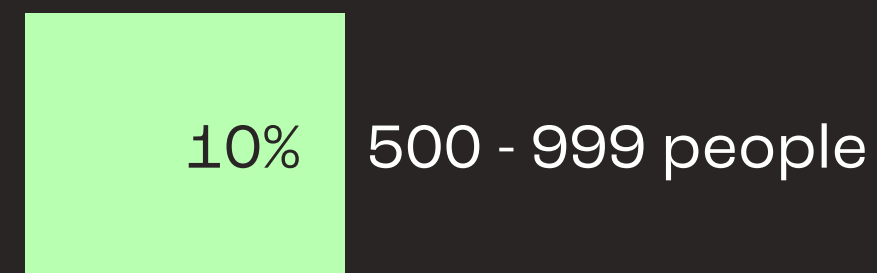
ethnic identity isn't very diverse



Respondents were overwhelmingly white or European. The percentage of all the other ethnicities combined were still less than those two combined. In terms of gender and ethnicity, most of our respondents identified as white or European men, followed by white or European women. This is a strong indicator that we all have work to do in increasing the diversity in this discipline. Having a diverse team provides more perspectives and brings about more ideas. What can we do to increase equity and representation in the discipline?

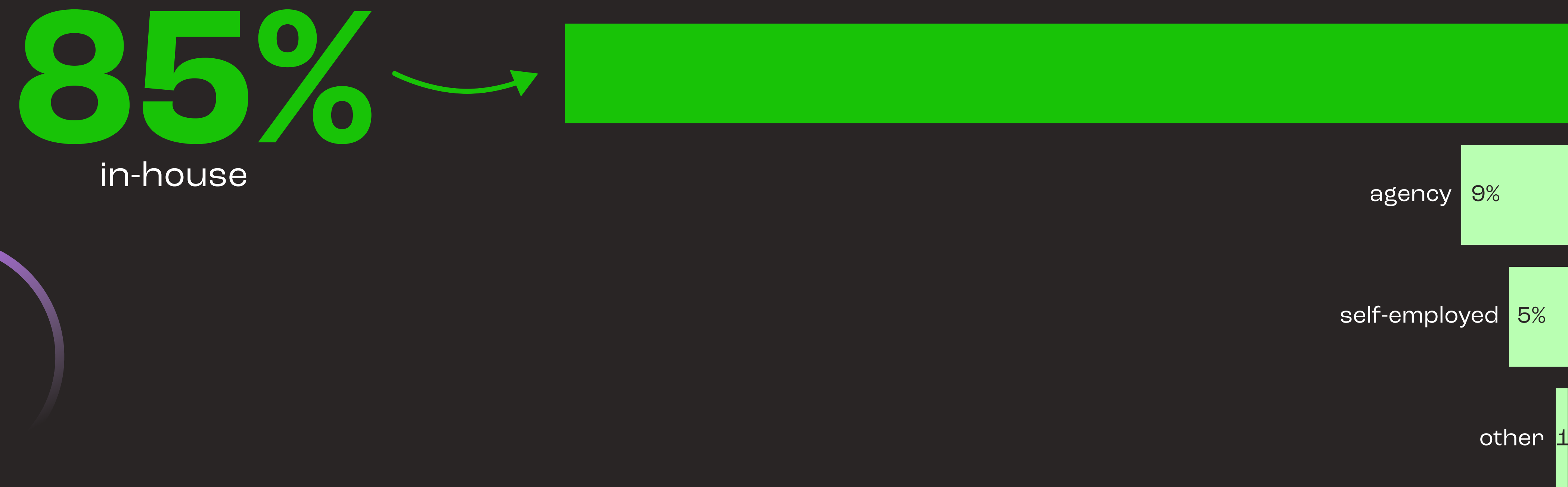
your organization

how big is your organization?



Most respondents worked at companies under 100 people (**37%**) followed by people working at larger, enterprise-sized companies (**30%**).

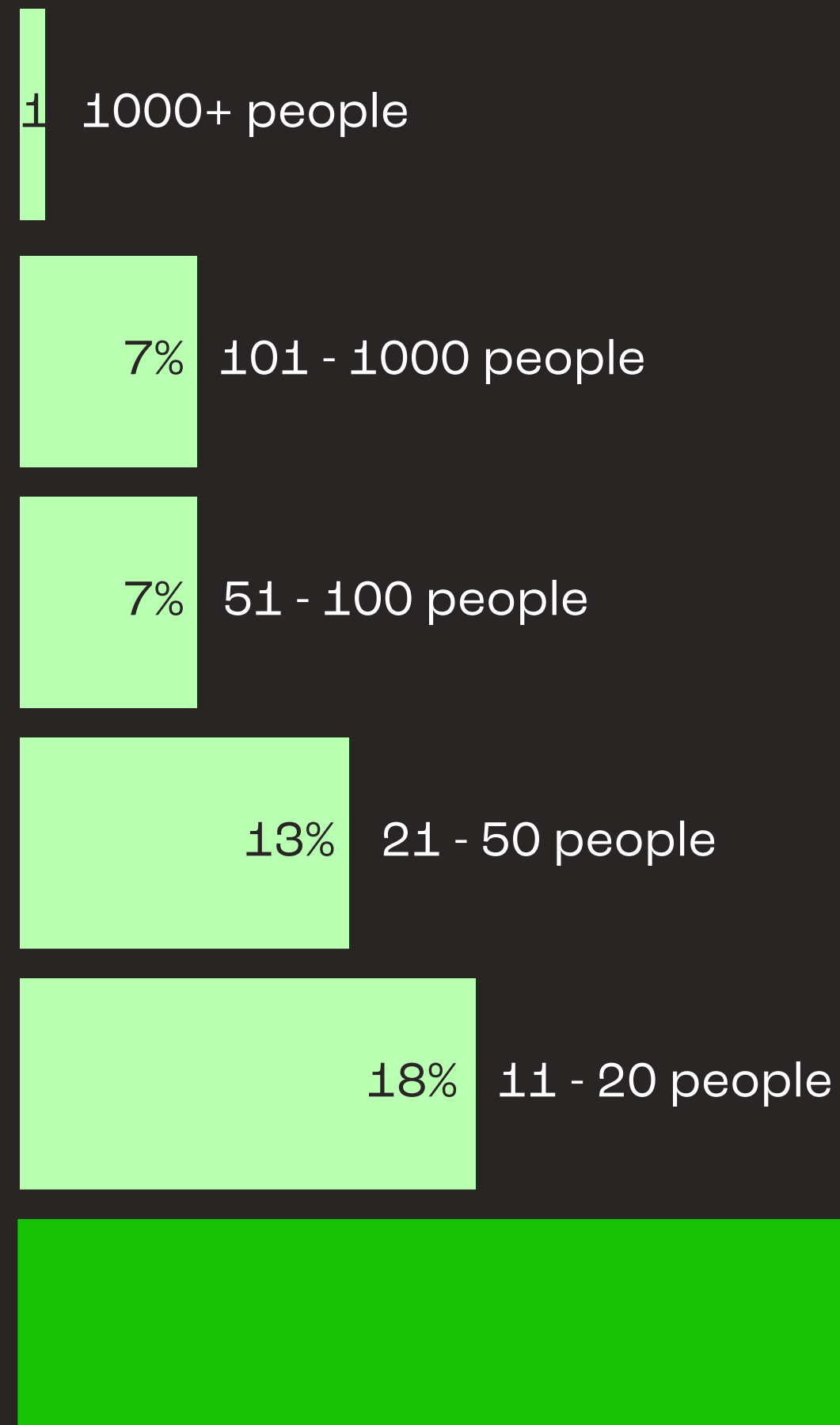
in-house or agency



Overwhelmingly, most respondents work in-house, as opposed to agency, or being self-employed.

your design org

Small design orgs, under 10 people, are in the majority.



54%

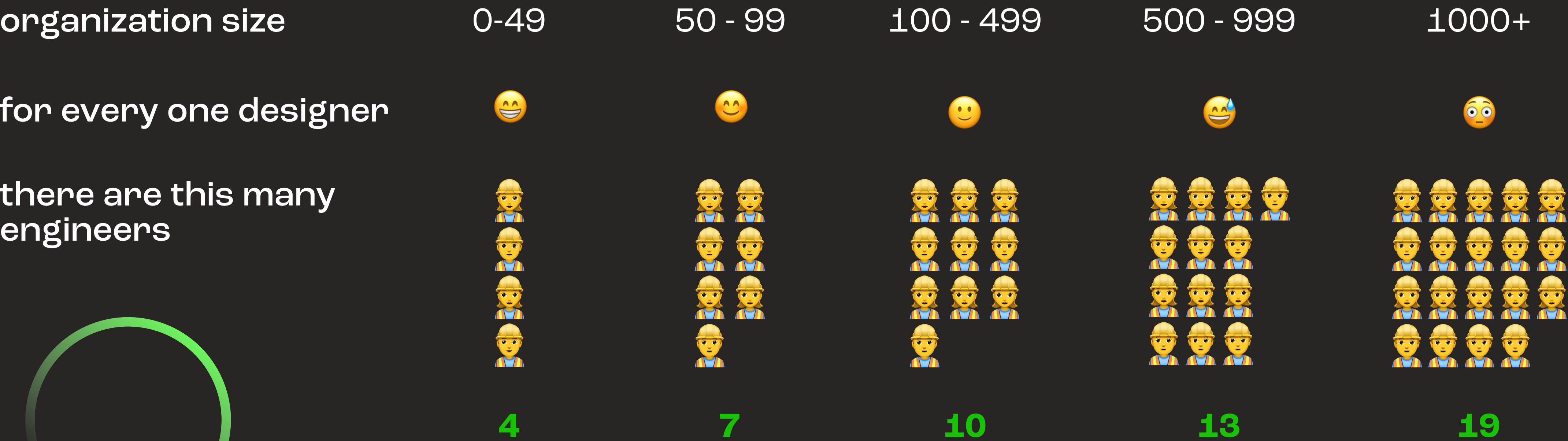
1 - 10 people



Respondents: 518

designers & engineers

When it comes to the designer to engineer ratio, the ratio grows with organization size. The increase is fairly steady, but jumps significantly with organizations over 1000 employees.

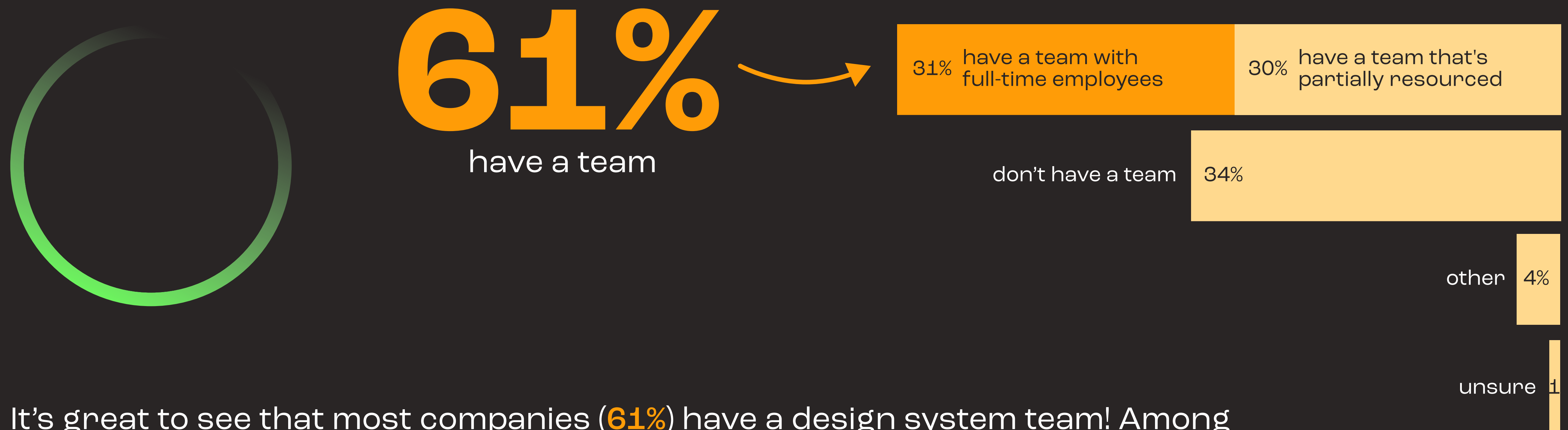




your design
system **team**

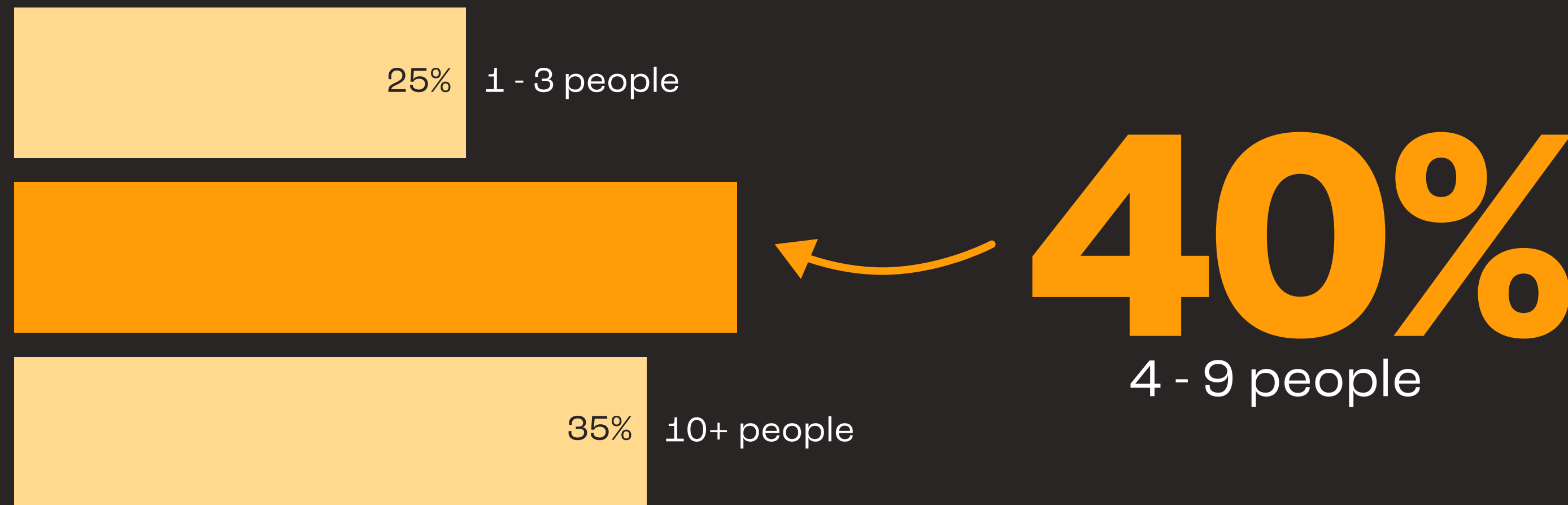


design system teams are more likely in bigger organizations



It's great to see that most companies (61%) have a design system team! Among those teams, roughly half have dedicated employees. The larger the company size, they more likely they'll have a team with dedicated employees. Most small organizations only have teams with employees partially resourced.

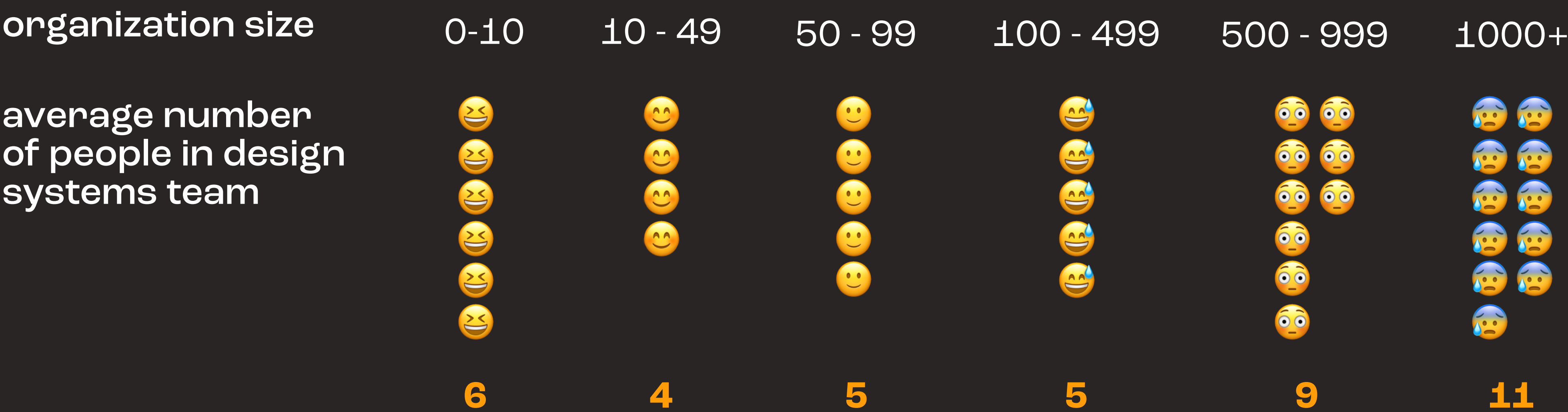
design system team size



A majority of design system teams are between 4-9 people (**40%**). Breaking the 10+ group even further, we learned **8%** of teams have 20+ people. To see how many teams are on the larger size is a great sign for the discipline!

design system team size increases with company size

As a company size increases, so does their design system team size. However, the size doesn't scale at the same proportion. But to some extent, this makes sense. Design system teams are built with efficiency in mind, so there isn't always a reason to scale the team proportionately. The average team size for companies under 10 employees is high. At this size, we suspect employees wear multiple hats and teams have an "all hands on deck" approach.



design system teams go beyond designers and developers

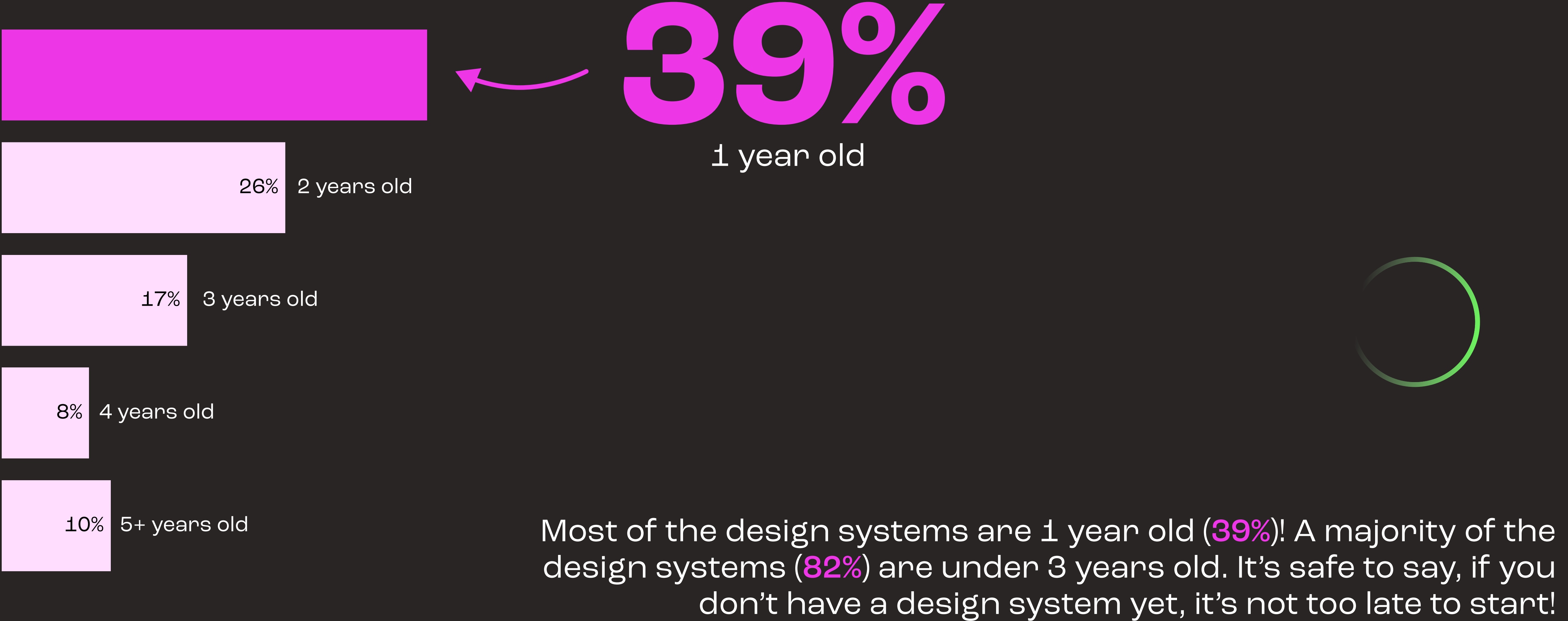


Design system teams don't just include designers and developers. Regardless of a design system's age, on average, there's at least one PM and one content writer on the team. It seems people are finally recognizing the importance of coordinating the team and writing good documentation. Older design systems have larger teams, which have scaled the number of people across the roles. Overall it's a healthy sign to see the investment of positions in a design system as time progresses.

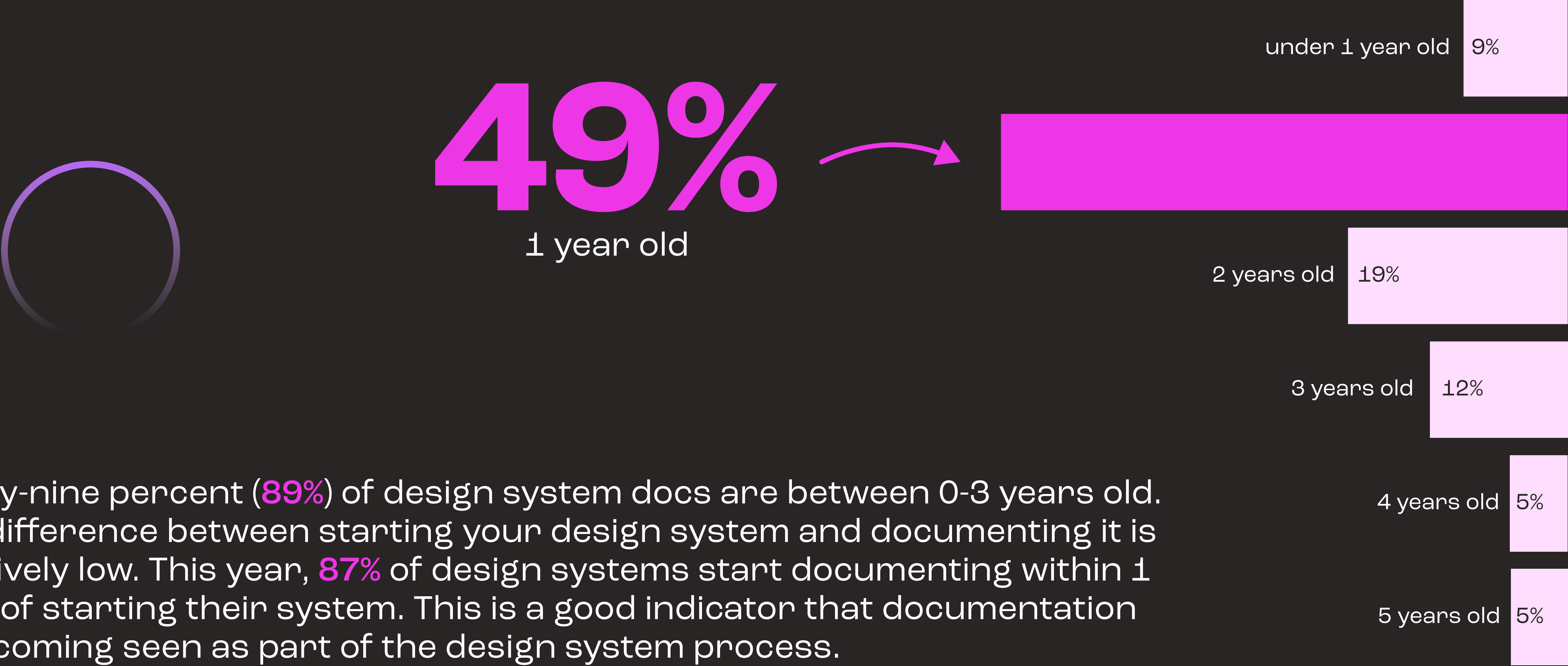
**your design
system and
documentation**

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design systems are gaining traction

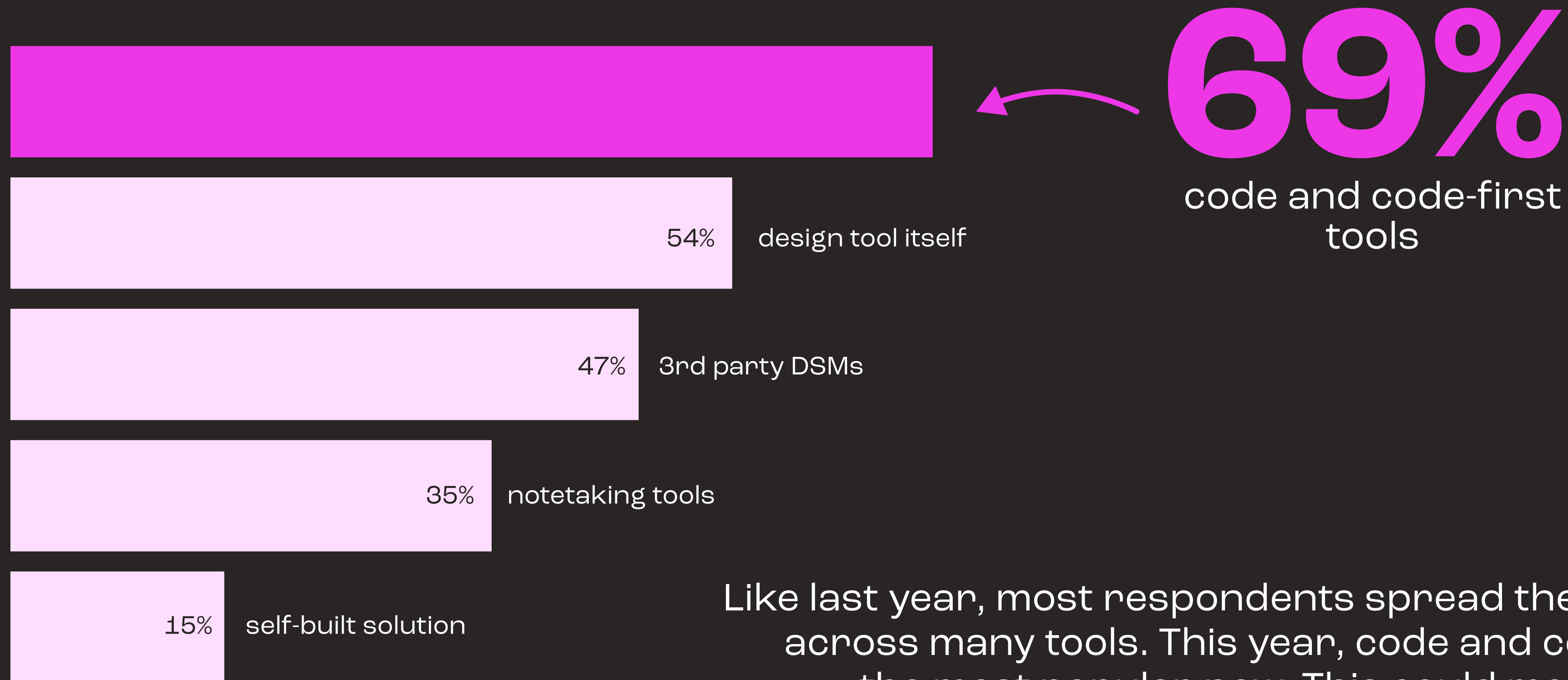


documentation has become a natural part of the process



Eighty-nine percent (89%) of design system docs are between 0-3 years old. The difference between starting your design system and documenting it is relatively low. This year, 87% of design systems start documenting within 1 year of starting their system. This is a good indicator that documentation is becoming seen as part of the design system process.

code and code-first tools are leading the charge



Like last year, most respondents spread their documentation across many tools. This year, code and code-first tools are the most popular now. This could mean those tools are becoming more robust for design systems.

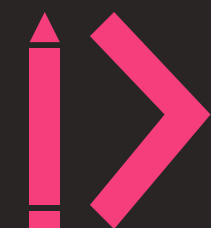
the most popular documentation tools



The design tool itself
54%



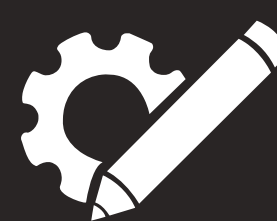
Storybook
47%



zeroheight
41%



Confluence
21%



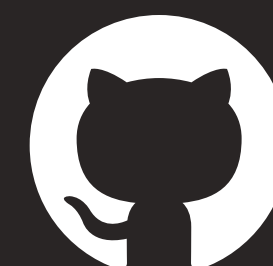
Self-built solution
15%



In-code documentation
10%



Notion
9%



GitHub Pages
7%

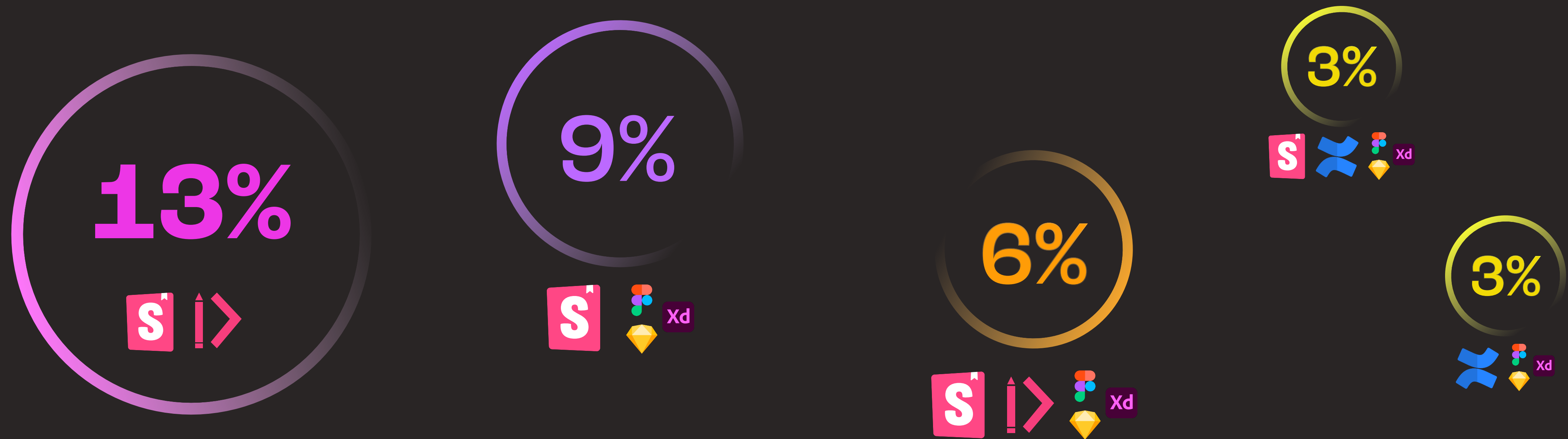


Google Docs
6%



ReadMe
3%

tool combination bingo

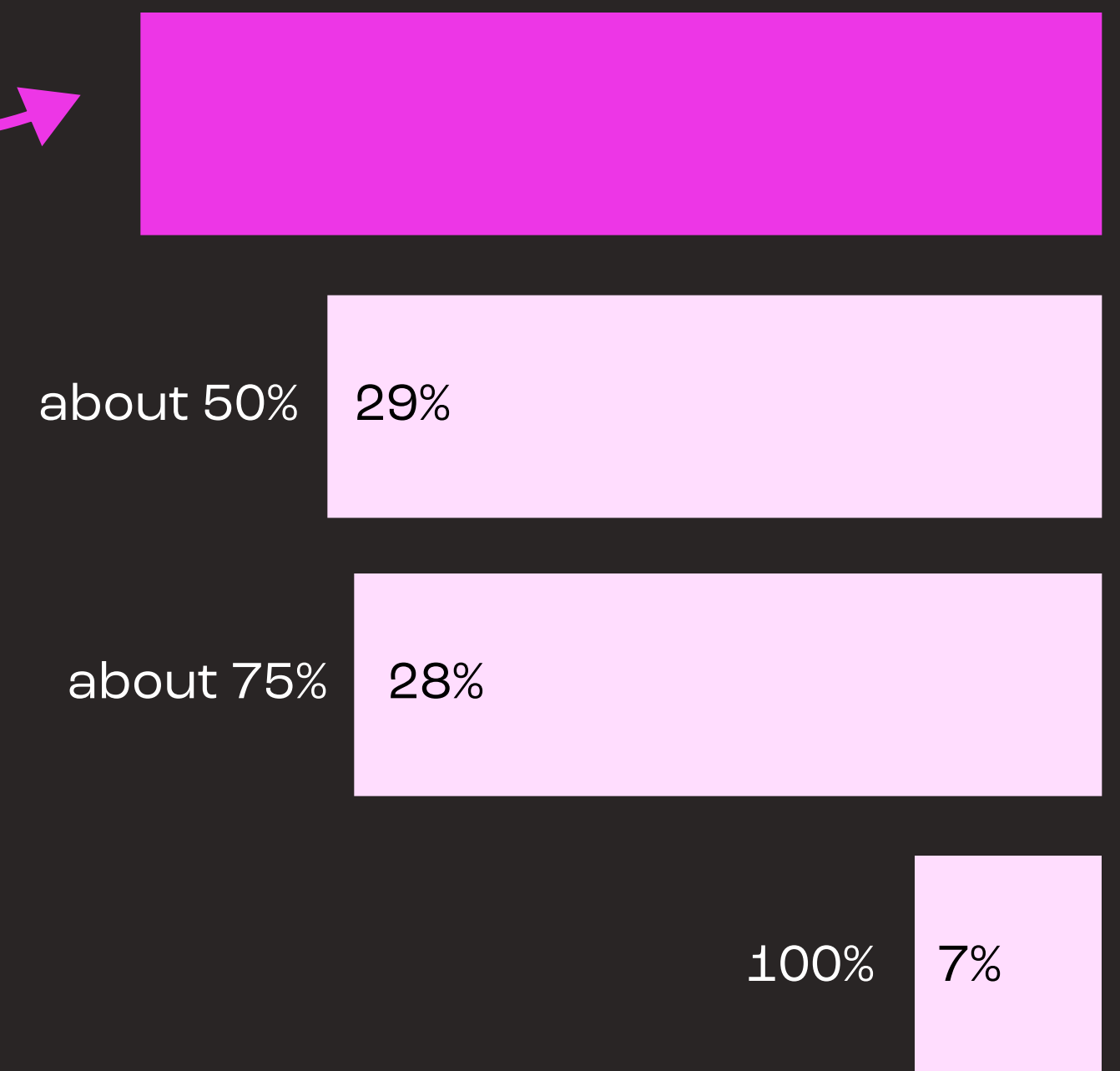


Like last year, organizations continue to use a combination of tools to get the job done. Our top combination this year is zeroheight and Storybook (**13%**). Teams also rely on just their design tool and Storybook (**8%**). Even though not a specific design system documentation tool, Confluence is in combinations that round out the top 5. While most people said they have separate design and developer documentation (**54%**), it's only **21%** higher than those who don't. It'll be interesting to see if this gap narrows next year, since it could be an indication that we're reaching that single source of truth we've all be wanting.

very few have their systems 100% documented

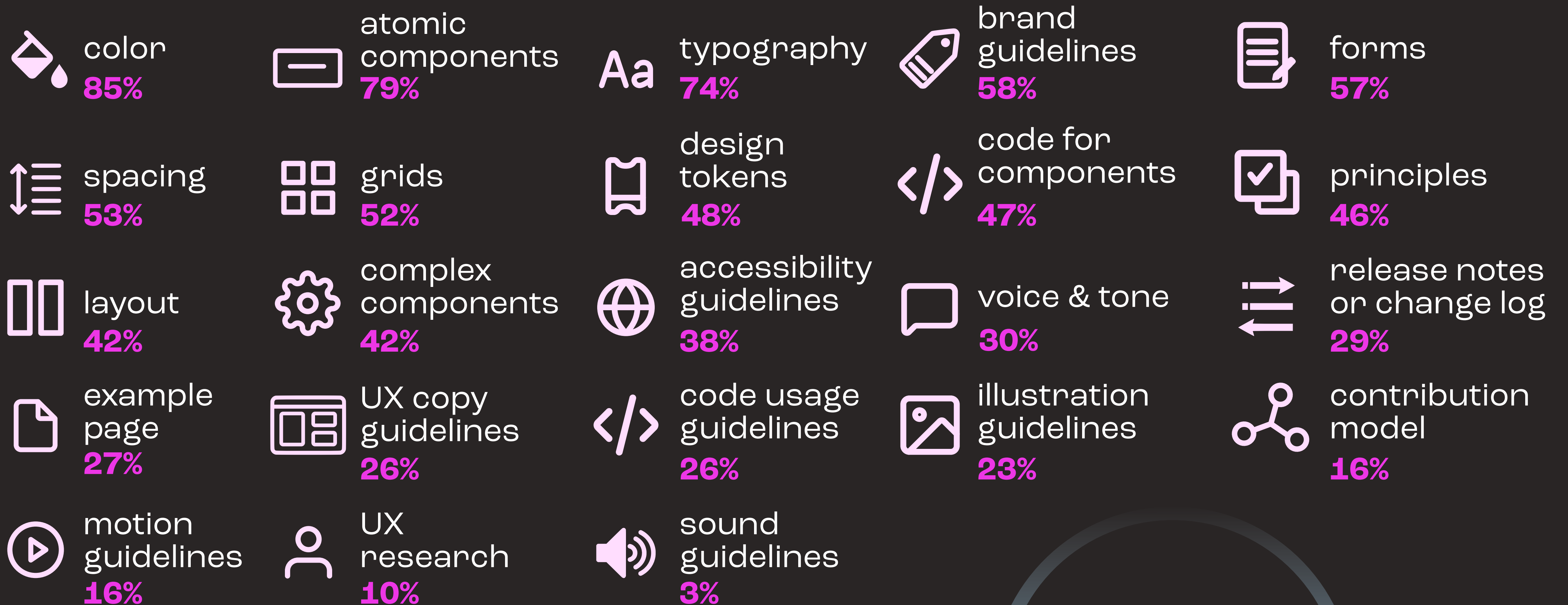
36%

under 25% of the design system is documented



Most respondents claimed that less than 25% of their design system was documented (36%). On the other hand, 36% also said their design system was at least 75% covered.

what does your documentation include?



Respondents: 518; allowed to select multiple

most of our documentation is monolingual



Few teams localize their systems (**10%**). A majority of respondents said their design system documentation is not localized. When cross-referencing our data, we didn't see any correlation between localization and maturity or organization size.

version control is a sign of maturity



42%

do not have version control



has version control

28%

do not, but is in progress

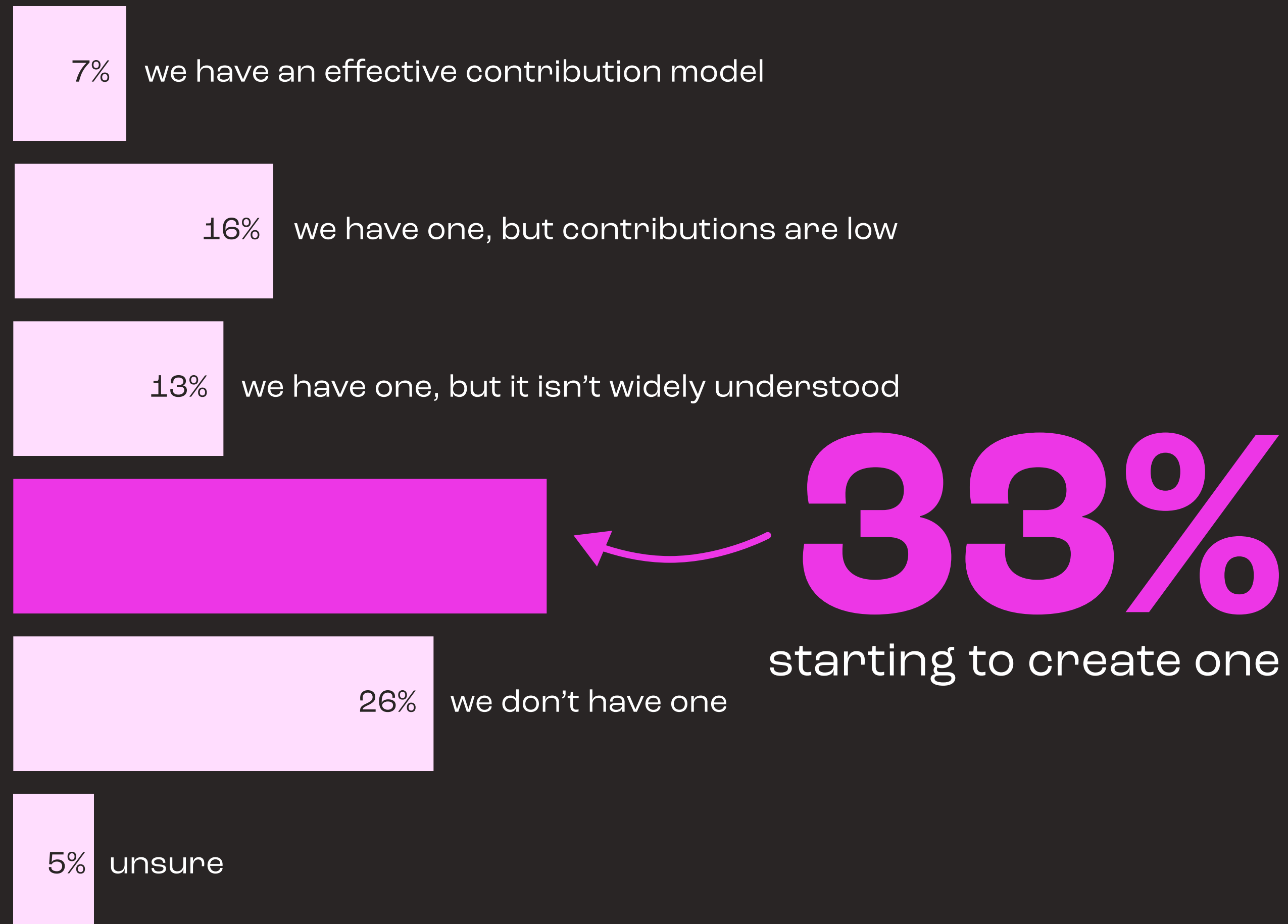
25%

unsure

4%

Most of the respondents don't use any versioning or releases in their documentation (**42%**). About a third (**28%**) use releases and about a quarter (**26%**) intend to include this in their documentation. The more mature the design system documentation is, the more likely it is to have versioning or releases. Of very mature docs, 82% have versioning and releases. Of mature docs, about half (**47%**) have it, and of partially mature docs, **34%** have it.

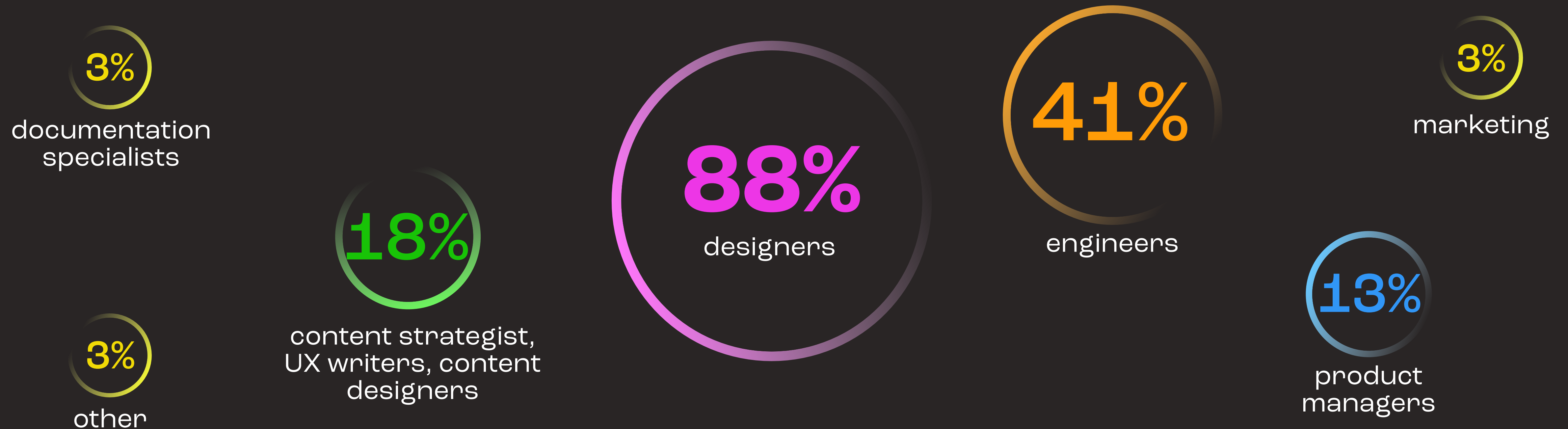
how people contribute to your design system



Respondents: 518

About a third of respondents (**36%**) have a contribution model and about a third are creating one. Of those that have a contribution model, very few (**20%**) have a model they feel is effective. We compared these contribution responses by the average number of contributors. Larger teams (8-10 people) are either creating a contribution model or don't have one at all. Teams with an effective contribution model have an average of 3 contributors. As a team scales, they need a contribution model, but are models effective only because there are fewer contributors?

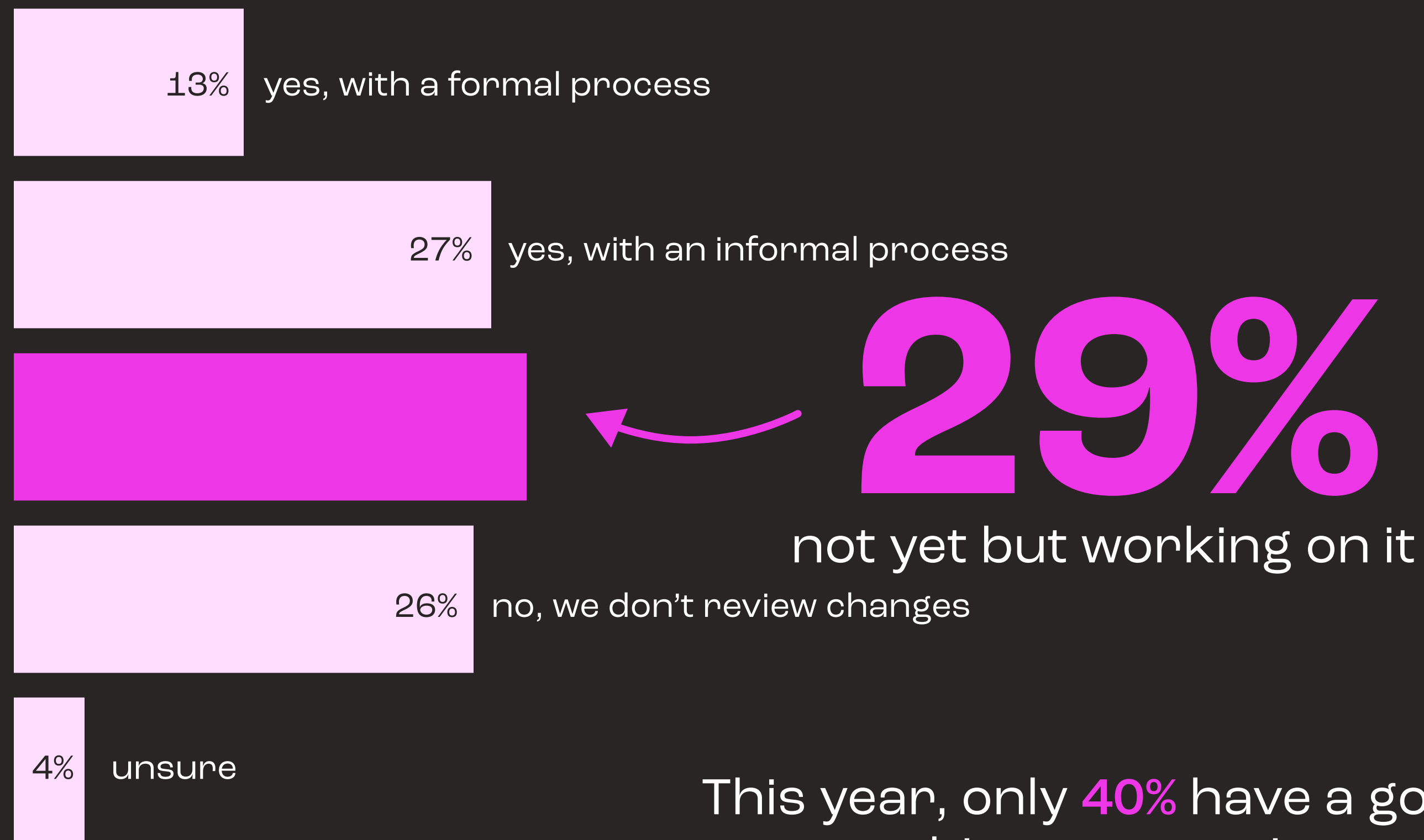
who documents your system?



Designers are the people who most contribute to documentation (88%). With content people at 18%, this could imply that organizations are taking documentation seriously and ensuring that there's a good experience with it.

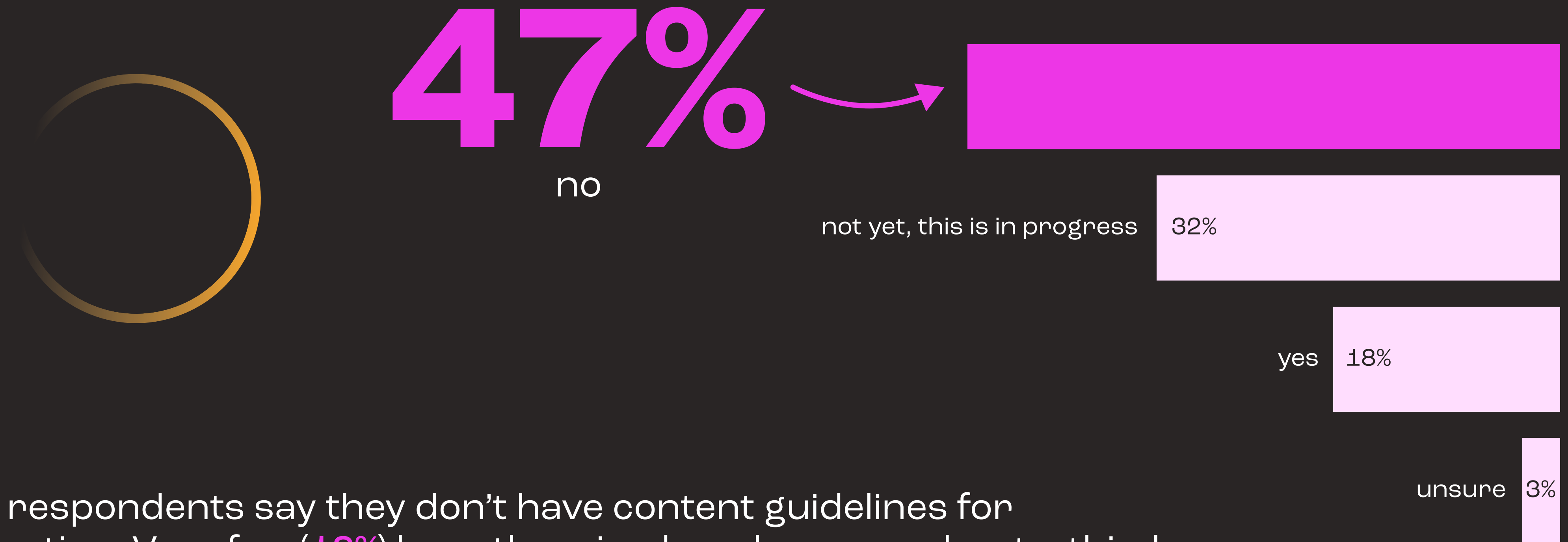
When looking at things a little deeper, the distribution of who documents is relatively even across org size. Larger organizations usually have more content people contributing to documentation.

governance isn't as common



This year, only **40%** have a governance process. Most respondents (**29%**) are working on creating process now. We're not surprised since many respondents said their design systems just were a year old (**39%**). As you can imagine, getting a design system up and running has to happen before teams can establish a governance process for documentation.

not many have content guidelines for their documentation



About half of respondents say they don't have content guidelines for document creation. Very few (**18%**) have them in place, however about a third are in the process of adding them. But with a large number of design systems under a year old (**39%**), content guidelines might not be needed just yet.

measuring the success of your documentation



70%

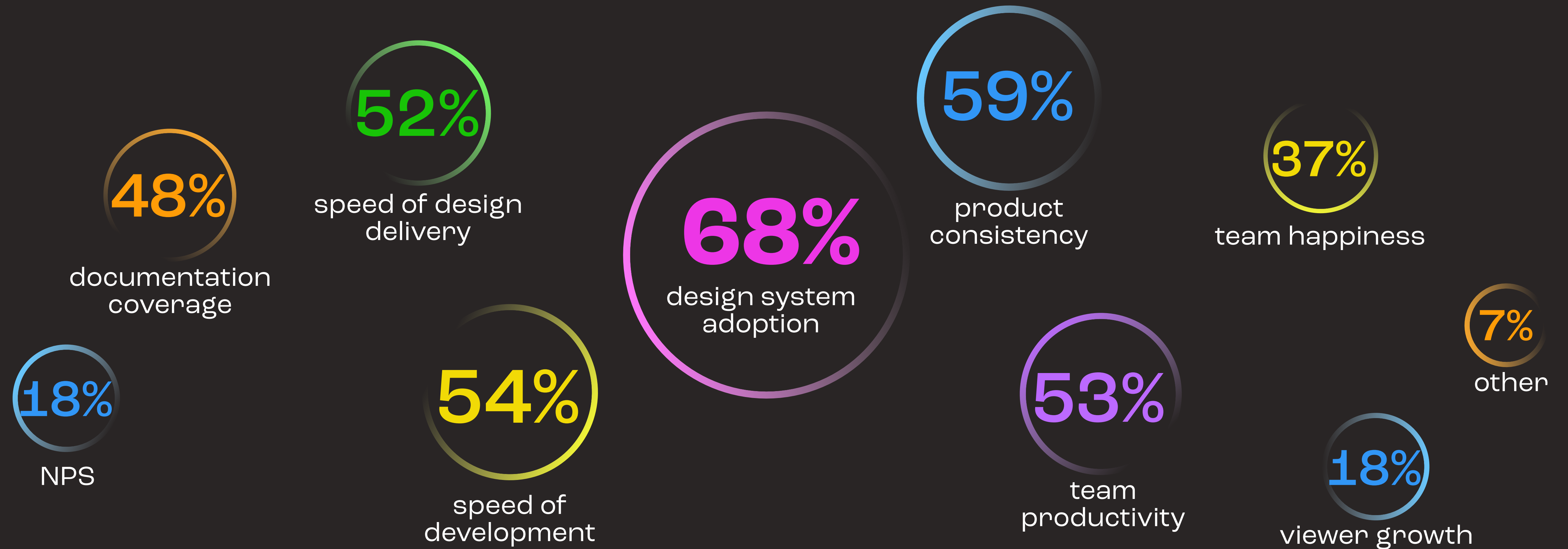
don't track
metrics on their
docs

77%

don't have KPIs
for their docs

Only **10%** of respondents track metrics on their documentation. However, **17%** of respondents are working toward measuring. Even if not tracking metrics, more of respondents (**16%**) have Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) directly associated with the success of their documentation.

adoption is the key concern



Out of those who have KPIs, adoption was ranked the highest. This year, we added product consistency, speed of design delivery, and speed of development as options and they all ranked high. Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a KPI ranked the lowest.

Respondents: 120; allowed to select multiple

design tokens continue to emerge

A little over half of our respondents use tokens (51%) and about a fifth (18%) are working on implementing them. Nearly all respondents are creating tokens for color and typography. Most are also creating them for spacing and shadows. Very few are creating tokens for animation or strings.

51%

of respondents
currently use design
tokens in some way

Respondents: 266; allowed to select multiple

66%

radius

92%

typography

6%

strings

62%

borders

97%

colors

16%

animation
properties

18%

grouped styles

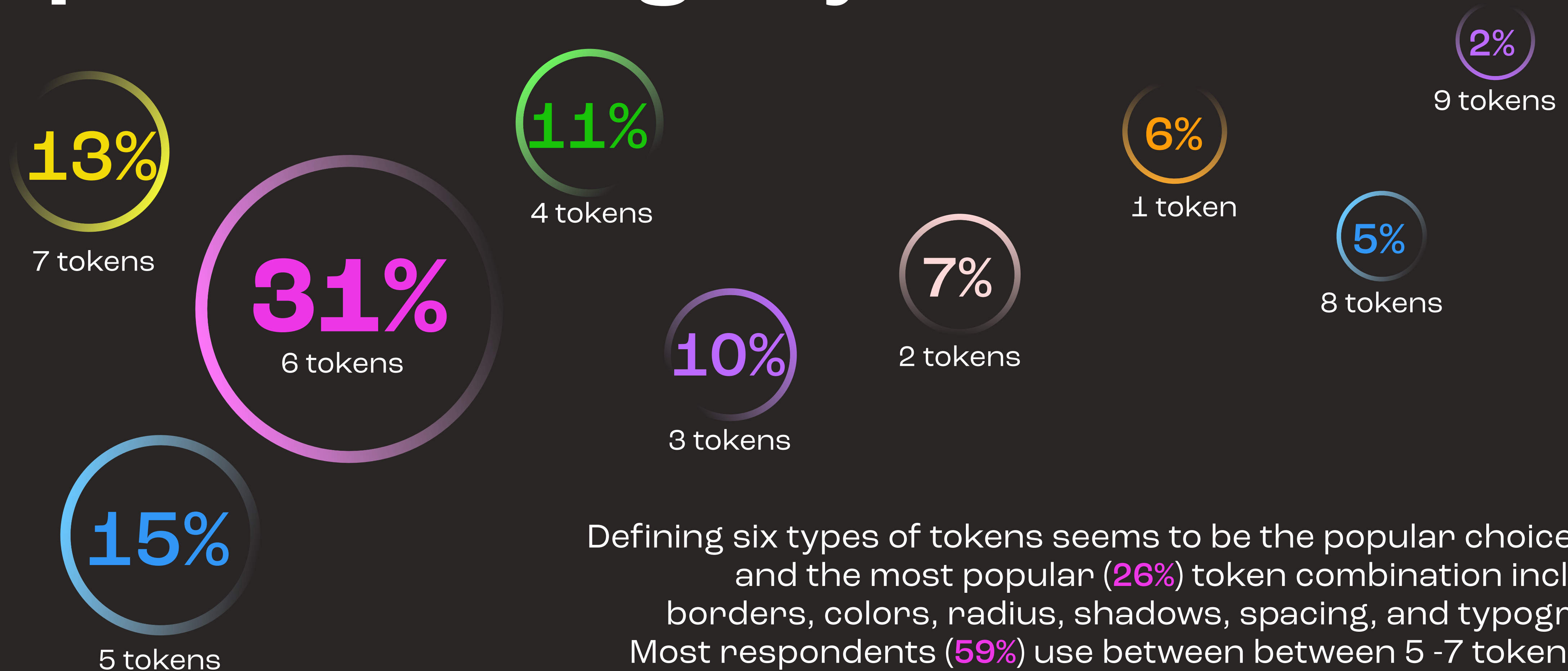
69%

shadows

76%

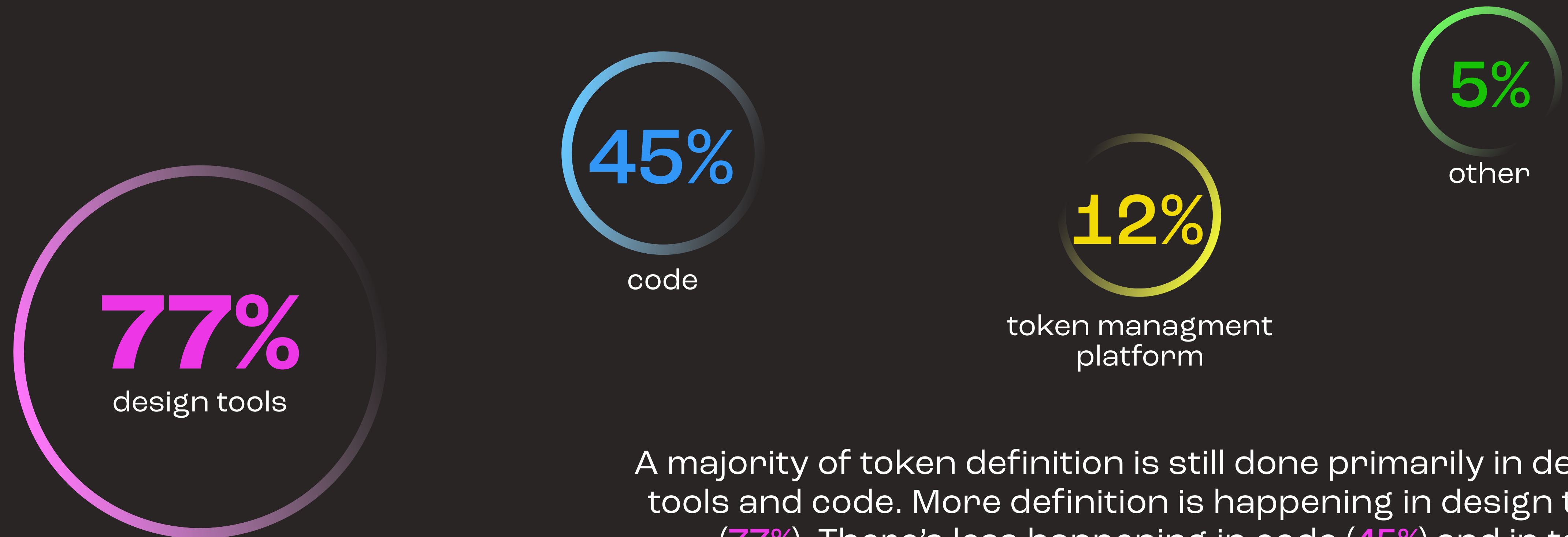
spacing

defining 5-7 tokens is the sweet spot for a design system



Defining six types of tokens seems to be the popular choice (**31%**) and the most popular (**26%**) token combination included: borders, colors, radius, shadows, spacing, and typography. Most respondents (**59%**) use between between 5 -7 tokens. Not many just dabble with a few tokens or go all in with over 8 tokens.

but where are tokens defined?



A majority of token definition is still done primarily in design tools and code. More definition is happening in design tools (77%). There's less happening in code (45%) and in token management platforms (12%). Last year, we wondered if this would be the case since design tools were building this into their products or had plug-ins (e.g., Tokens Studio for Figma). It looks like it's making an impact.

design tokens and continuous integration

31%

no



not yet, but trying

27%

yes, from design to code

21%

yes, syncs both ways

6%

yes, from code to design

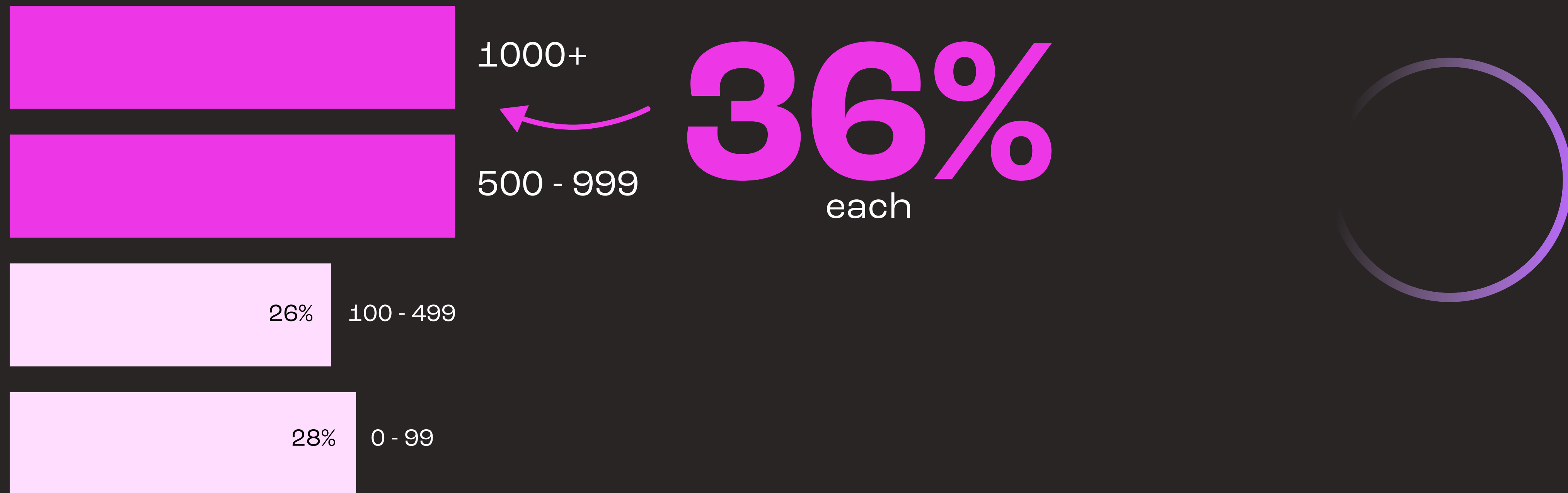
4%

unsure

11%

It's about even for those who have continuous integration with tokens and those who don't have it (31% each). However, about the same amount (27%) are trying to figure this out for their system. From this, it can seem like the field is still trying to navigate this area.

what are the hallmarks of mature design system documentation?



This year, mid-size companies have more mature systems than mid-large size companies. This tells us smaller companies might be a little more nimble in getting their system to a mature state.

what are the hallmarks of mature design system documentation?

 **51%**

have version control,
compared to **28%** as
the average

 **61%**

have a contribution
model, compared to
54% as the average

 **65%**

use design tokens,
compared to **51%**
as the average

 **75%**

have dedicated
design system teams,
compared to **61%** as
the average

The gap between the hallmarks of a design system are narrowing. This could mean that it's much easier to get your design system up to speed and there's more investment focused on them.

design systems bring consistency, speed and efficiency

Thinking about their current design system, our respondents overwhelmingly agreed on these benefits:



86%

mentioned it makes their product more consistent

81%

noted it increases the efficiency of their designers

73%

said it increases the speed of product development



71%

mentioned it makes their product portfolio more consistent

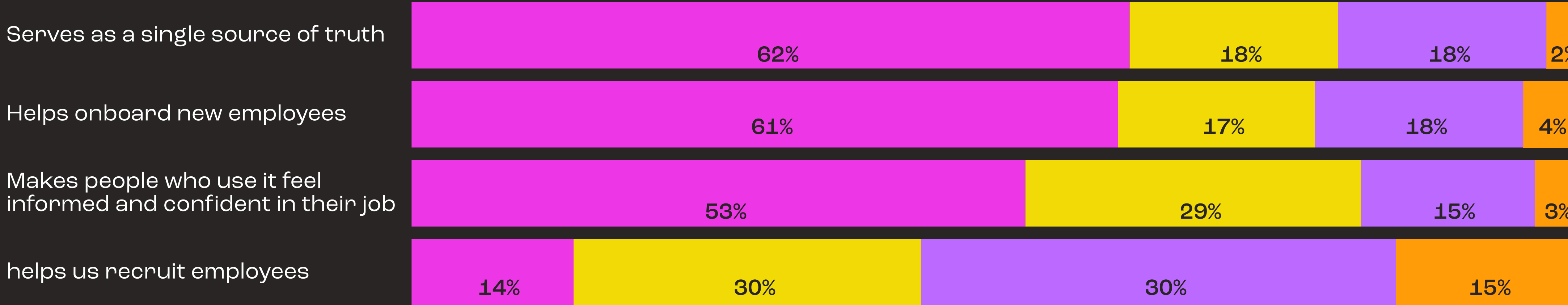
69%

said it increases the efficiency of their developers

66%

said it makes collaboration more seamless between designers and developers

documentation is great for truth, onboarding and confidence



We added this question this year to get a sense of people’s sentiment. Respondents feel that their current documentation serves as a single-source of truth (62%), helps with onboarding (61%), and informs teammates so they can do their job (53%) confidently. They feel differently about using it as a recruiting tool, where most are neutral (30%) or disagree (41%). The data made sense when we reviewed the comments. Mostly unhappy or mostly happy people feel their design system is still a work in progress and can improve.

**your design
system and**

happiness

design systems teams need a hug



31%

each



3%

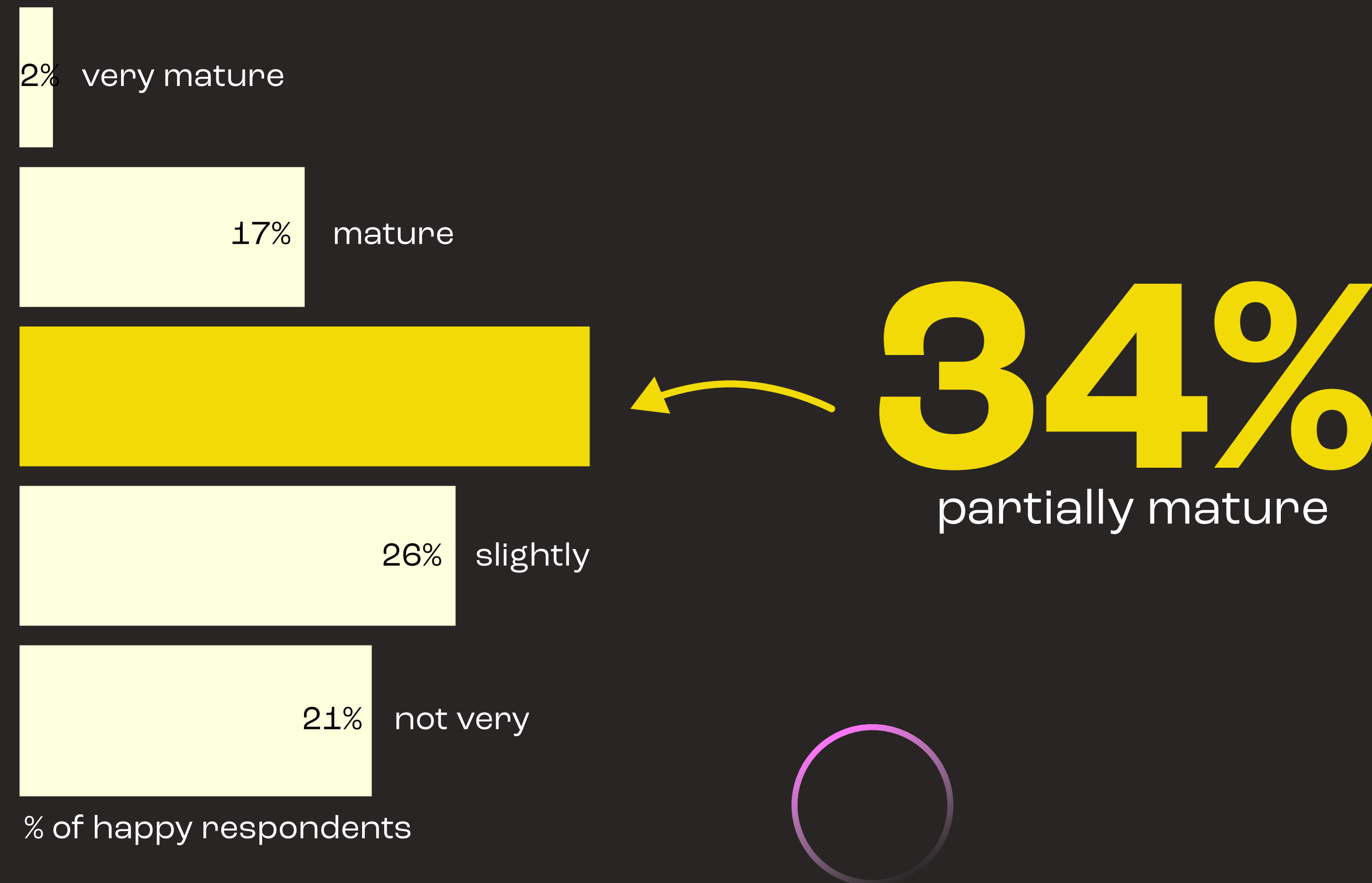
26%



10%

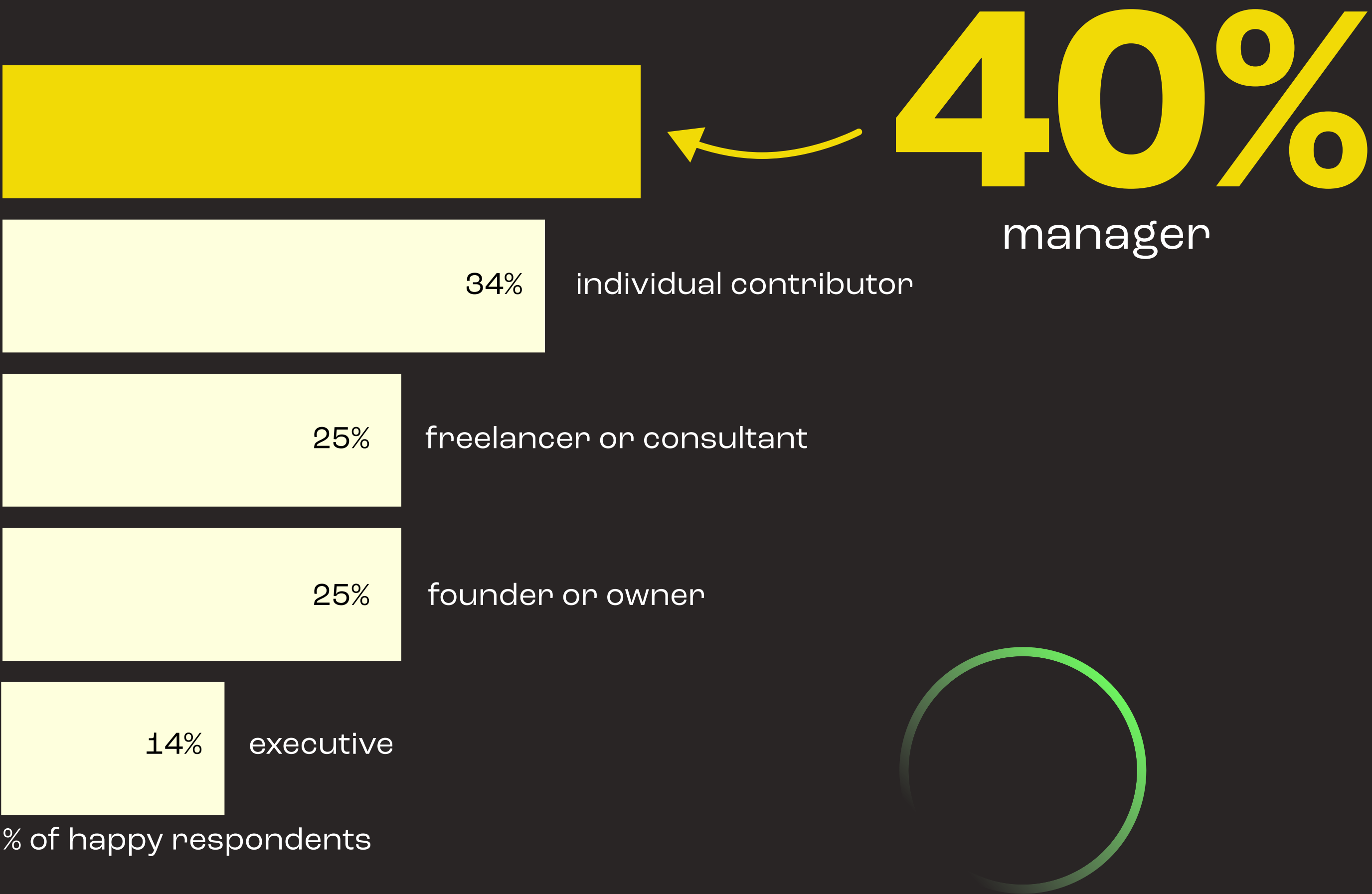
Overall happiness with their documentation is split across respondents. The “mostly happy” 😊 and “neither happy nor unhappy” 😐 sentiments were tied at **31%**. Following that, **26%** said they were “mostly unhappy” 😞. Only **3%** reported they were “very happy” 😄 and **10%** were “very unhappy” 😭. In the next few pages, we’ll dive into the hallmarks of those who are happy with their documentation.

happiness and documentation maturity



Most respondents (**34%**) noted their design system documentation was partially mature (i.e., partial content, some dev integration). About a fifth felt their documentation was mature. When comparing maturity with documentation happiness, we're not surprised with our findings. Those with very mature or mature documentation were overwhelmingly happy (**82%**). Documentation that wasn't very mature had significant unhappiness (**70%**).

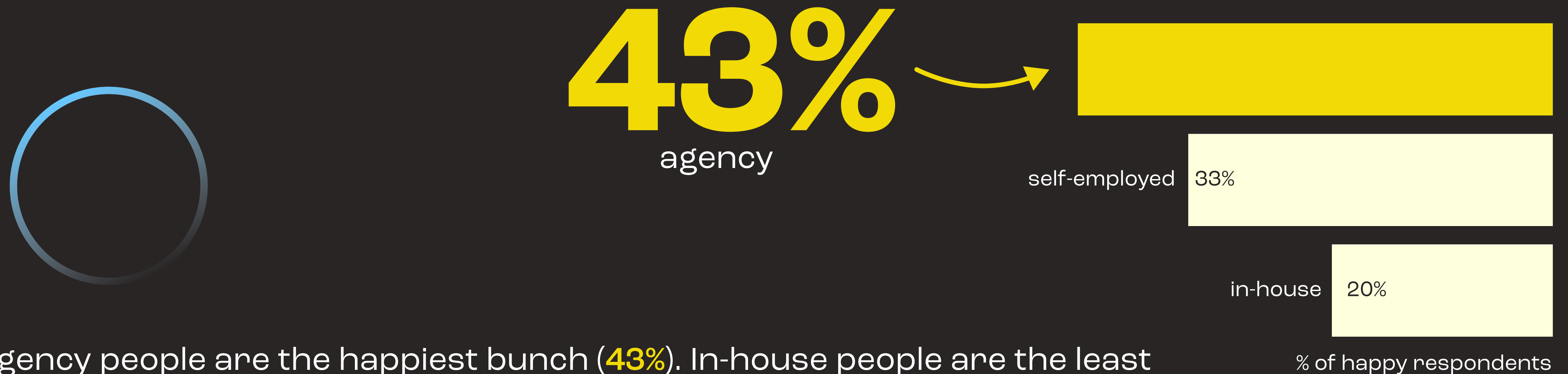
happiness with the design system documentation and their role



Respondents: 518

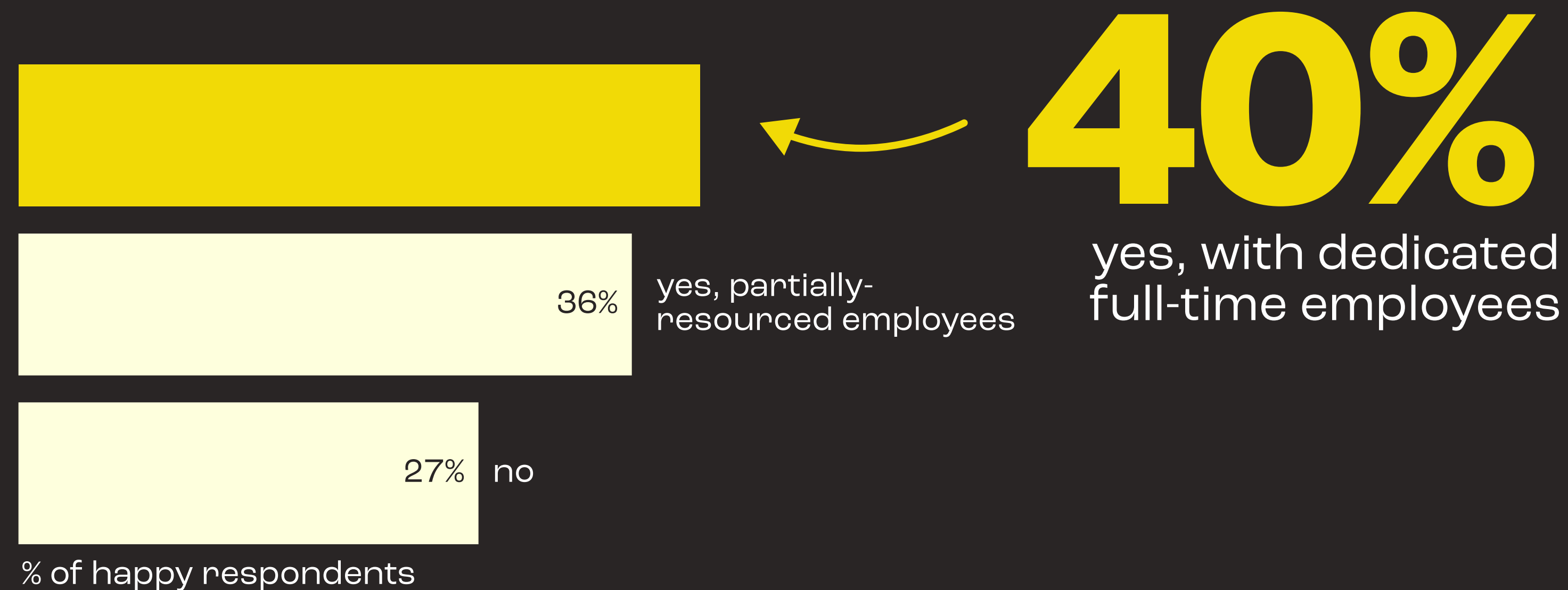
Depending on their role, people are feeling less happy and more neutral. While managers are the happiest (40%), individual contributors (IC) are feeling more neutral (38%), and freelancers or consultants are feeling mostly neutral (42%). In some ways this makes sense, when digging through comments, managers are happy with their team's work so far. From an IC perspective, even though they're making good progress, they know there's always more work to be done.

is happiness related to being in-house?



Agency people are the happiest bunch (**43%**). In-house people are the least happiest (**20%**). The happiness sentiment was evenly distributed between happy, unhappy, and neutral for in-house folks. Looking into comments from in-house people, they're happy because the design system provides value, even though they know there's still work to be done. Neutral sentiments were attributed to their systems being a work in progress and the lack of resources. Unhappy sentiments included process challenges, outdated information, difficulty to maintain, and lack of resources.

happiness in your design system team



People with full-time dedicated teams indicate slightly more happiness (**40%**) compared to those with partially-resourced teams (**36%**). While we can assume most people would love a dedicated team, organizations might be happy with the resources they have. Those without a design system team report only **27%** happiness. Overall when it comes to happiness, it seems that even having a partially resourced team is better than no team at all.

how much is covered in a happy design system?



60%

at least 75% is
documented



about half

28%

about 25%

12%

% of happy respondents

When more of the system is documented, people are happier. Our survey indicates that **60%** of happy people had at least **75%** of their design system documented. On the contrary, only **12%** of people were happy when **25%** of their design system was documented.

happiness in contribution



59%

we have an effective
contribution

47%

we have one, but
contributions are low

31%

we have one, but it isn't
widely understood

28%

we're starting to create one

23%

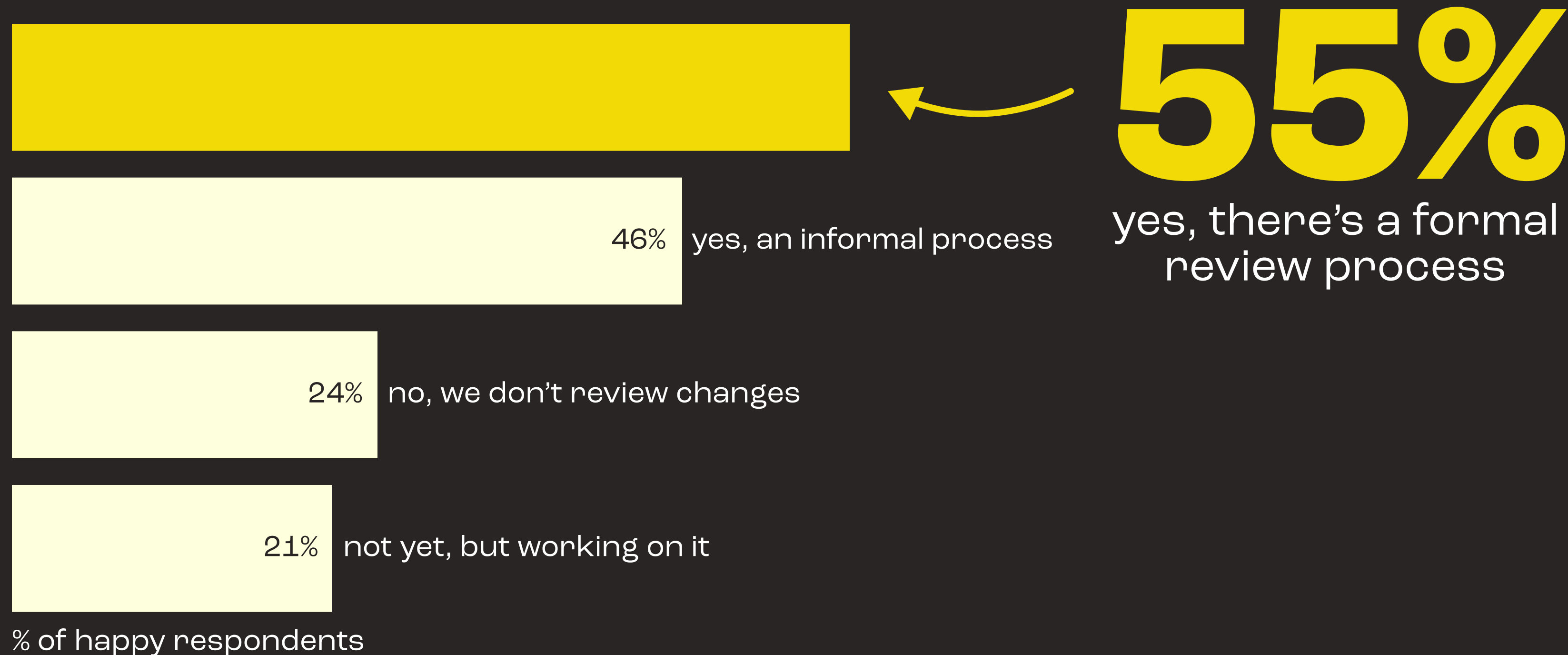
we don't have one

% of happy respondents

When it comes to contribution models, having a functional model correlates to happiness with your documentation. Happiness seems to be more about having your contribution model understood and less about having active contributions. Teams who are starting to create a contribution model seem to be more unhappy with their documentation (**43%**).

It'd be interesting to see if their happiness is a correlation of not having a contribution process or if their unhappiness is impetus for creating a contribution model.

happiness in contribution governance



People are more happy with some sort of governance model for documentation.

happiness in design system governance model



39%
each

centralized

hybrid

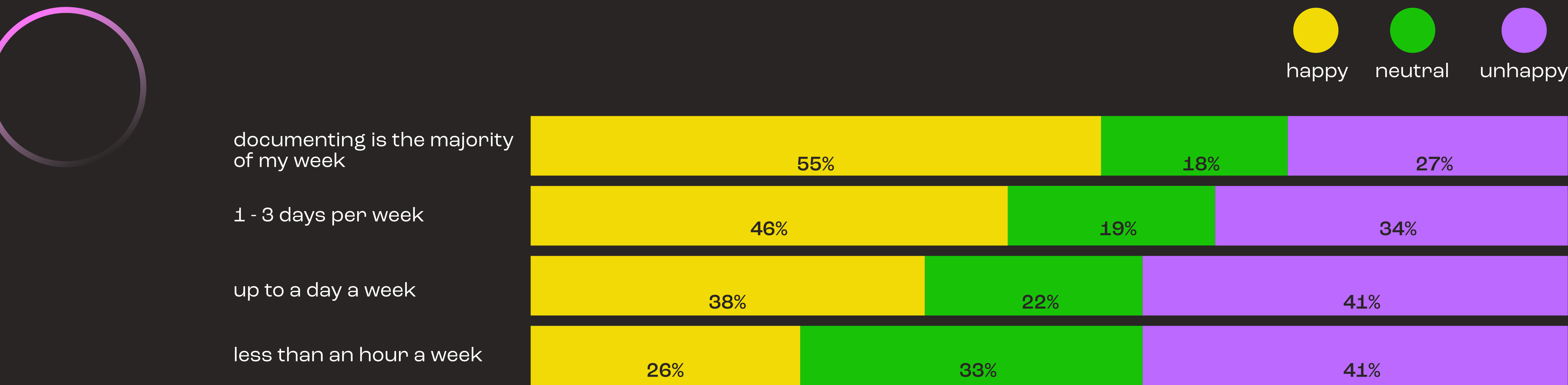
federated

24%

% of happy respondents

Happiness seems to strongly correlate to having a centralized or hybrid governance model in place. Only **24%** of those who have a federated governance model reported happiness. We can see how this might be - centralized and hybrid teams typically have resources and accountability with maintaining documentation. When teams are federated, they're often running a little more scrappy and might not have time to maintain documentation.

more time leads to more happiness



This isn't surprising that when people are able to spend more time on documentation, they're happier with it. People who spend 1-3 days a week or most of their week are the happiest. Respondents who spend less than an hour or up to a day per week are the least happiest.

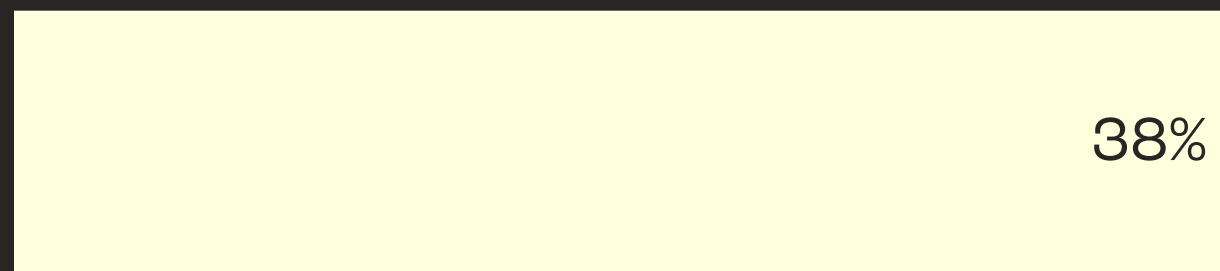
people using third-party DSMs are happier

42%

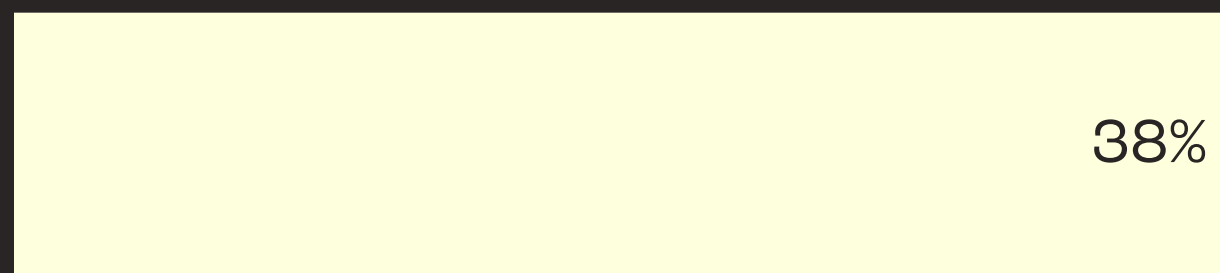
3rd party DSMs



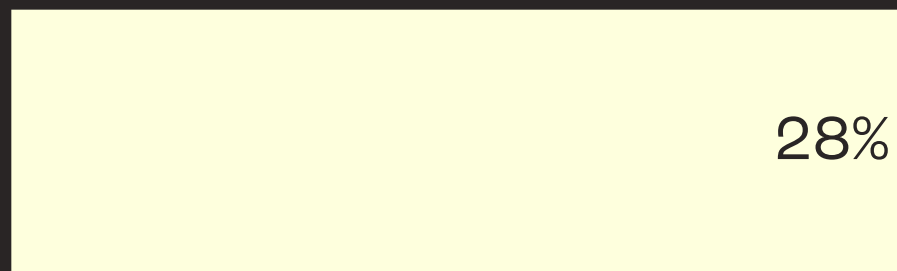
38% self built



38% the design tool itself



28% note-taking tools



% of happy respondents

Happiness is relatively even across tools used for documentation, but people using third-party DSMs are the most happy (**42%**) and least unhappy (**25%**). People using the design tool itself or self-built solutions seem to be in a love-hate relationship with their tool (each with **38%** for happiness and unhappiness).

Respondents: 518; allowed to select multiple tools



thanks,

everyone!

That's a wrap for the **How We Document 2023** report! Thanks for participating and checking it out. Over the next few weeks, we'll be hosting a series of webinars that dive deeper into some of the findings. Sign up on our mailing list to be notified.

We'll be back at the end of the year to see how things have evolved over the next 12 months. Will we have more documented? Will teams get even bigger? Will we move the needle on building more inclusive teams?

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